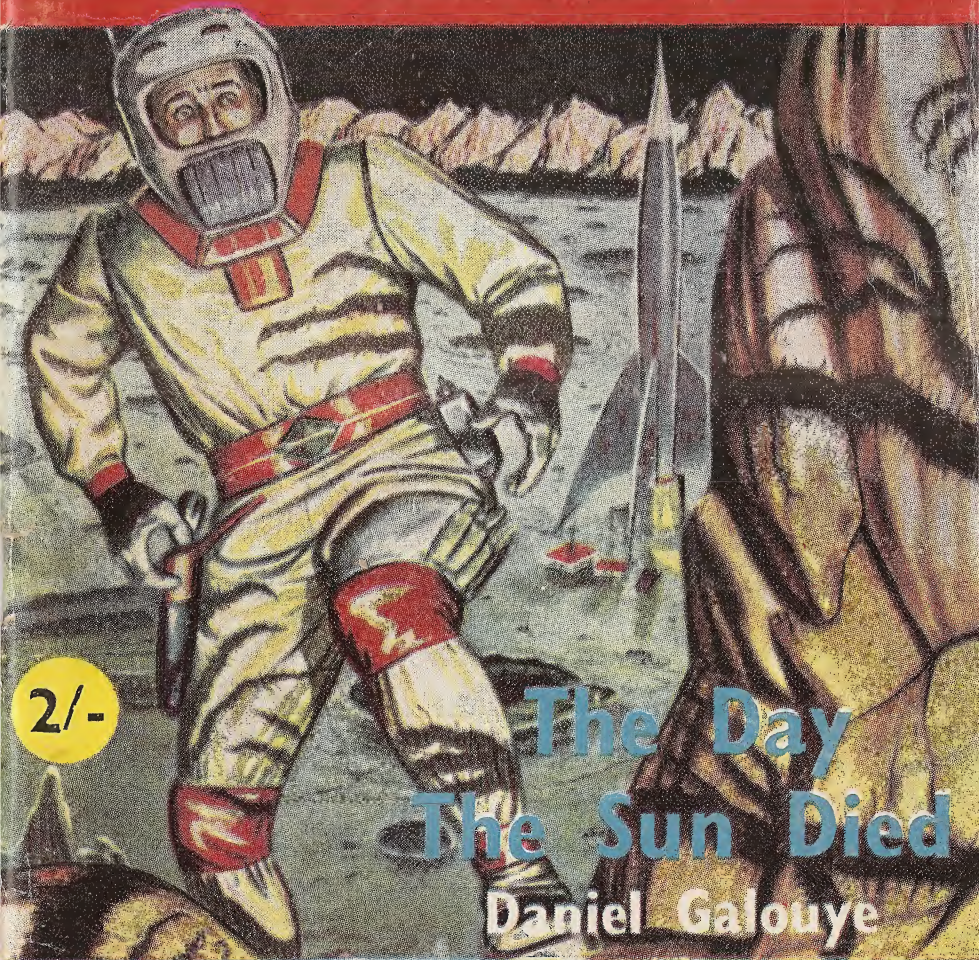


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Daniel Galouye

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The Foundation had been formed to guard the secret of cosmic creation; but scientists grew curious — and experimented. And that was—

THE DAY THE SUN DIED

By DANIEL F. GALOUBE



TARL BRENT brought his hand down sharply on one of the ivory buttons inlaid in the mahogany desk top. He rose to pace while he laced the door with restless glances.

The intercom buzzed suddenly and he flicked one of its switches. "Yes?"

"Sorry, Mister Brent, but Miss Barton isn't at her desk."

"I thought she understood about the dictation?"

"She had to leave suddenly," the telephone receptionist explained.

"Too suddenly to check out first?"

"I believe it was an emergency."

"Oh? What was it?"

"She didn't say. But she won't be back this afternoon."

Tarl sighed. "Very well. See if you can get my wife on the phone."

A minute later he went back to answer the intercom's persistent buzzing.

"Mrs. Brent isn't home, sir."

"But she must be. She had a club meeting there."

"The maid said she called it off."

"Why?"

"The girl didn't know — except that Mrs. Brent said it was something urgent."

Tarl glanced away reflectively. "I'll be out for the rest of afternoon, Clara."

"But the Baleston contract!" she protested. "The conference!"

"It can wait."

"But, Mister Brent, that contract runs into five figures!"

"Baleston won't mind. Call my chauffeur at the garage please."

"Charles called about an hour ago, Mister Brent. Said he had to take off to see the dentist. Trouble with his bridgework."

"He hasn't any bridgework."

"That's what he said, sir."

Tarl frowned. "All right then. Call a cab. And, Clara . . ."

"Yes, Mister Brent?"

He laughed. "Don't call back and say all the drivers are on strike."

Relaxing again in his chair, Tarl ran listless fingertips over his forehead. But suddenly he tensed . . . He could feel it again — stronger now, though.

Apprehensively, he stared about the room — at the desk, the ceiling, the bookcases, the designs in

the carpeting . . . It was as though they all were — *alive!* As though, animated by some vital force of their own, they were vacillating at a speed so intense that their motion was undiscernible.

Repressing fear this time, he tried to analyse the manifestation . . . A mental effect — something like claustrophobia? Was it only imagination that suggested each molecule of air, each atom of matter was oscillating between reality and some nether existence?

And the impression of terrifying power! It was as though all the substance about him were poised before a violent eruption of energy that could rock the universe!

Abruptly the illusion was gone.

T. J. CONNOR sat rigidly at the head of the large conference table. His heavy fingers drummed impatiently on the once-polished surface. He glanced at the clock, then turned back to watch the others entering the auditorium-like room.

An elderly man, T. J. was a paradox of appearance. He was portly, yet the composite lines of his tired face suggested gauntness. His shoulders sagged wearily, yet there was a restless anticipation in his eyes. Although his hair was a dusty white, it was otherwise like the hair of a much younger person.

A stout, nervous man hurried through the door and swept down the aisle past the rows of seats,

attracting the stares of scores in the auditorium. Apparently excited by his appearance, they whispered alarmingly to one another.

Unmindful of the disturbance, the man climbed the platform and took his seat on T. J.'s right.

He glanced in dismay at the Chief Director. "Does this mean . . . ?" He choked back the words as though afraid to complete the question.

T. J. smiled indulgently. "No, Dr. Caldwell. It isn't that."

Caldwell's breath came out as if he had been holding it in for hours. "Then what—"

"We're almost all here. There'll be an explanation."

A man in a chauffeur's uniform entered the hall, escorting a tall, shapely brunette whose hands were clasped restlessly together.

"There's his driver," Caldwell noted, motioning.

T. J. nodded. "With Marcella, his wife. I wanted to make sure they were here before we started."

The chauffeur and the woman sat in the first row, on the edge of their seats.

A cluster of persons bulged in through the door like ragweed and dispersed into the remaining spaces. One of them, a slight blonde in a business suit, sat next to the chauffeur and leaned over to talk with him and the brunette.

The man on T. J.'s left planted his elbows on the table. "Maud Barton?" He nodded askance at the blonde.

"Yes, Dr. Langley," the Chief

Director acknowledged. "That's his secretary. All three immediates are here now."

He glanced back toward the rear of the hall. A small, bespectacled man with matted, grey hair was entering. He slammed the door behind him and the report drew a curtain of silence down over the assembly.

"Here's Dr. Saunders," T. J. exclaimed, relieved. "I believe we can start."

He waited until the mathematician took the chair at the other end of the table, then he stood with his knuckles resting limply on the tabletop—stood staring abstractedly at the directors, at the tense, frozen faces of the audience.

His hesitant eyes took in the musty curtains of the room, the window sills with their months-long accumulation of dust, the floor still littered with hastily scribbled scraps of paper.

"I have called this post-mortem meeting of the Foundation," he said finally, "because something has come up that demands our attention. If you'll recall—"

A man in the second row sprang to his feet. "For God's sake, T. J.! Get to the point! Are we in trouble?"

The Chief Director smiled reassuringly.

A woman in the audience rose. "Is it—Brent?"

T. J. held up his hands. "Nothing like that. There is no cause for concern. This is a meeting for discussion—not emergency action."



The assembly's sigh of relief came like a stirring wind over a hot desert. Relaxing, they leaned back in their chairs.

"You see," T. J. went on. "I've been in indirect contact with *It*."

The audience exploded in violent anger, lurching to their feet and shouting. As one, the directors sprang up, turning chairs over behind them:

"You fool!" roared Caldwell, vehemence burning in his eyes.

Langley, the physicist, pounded the table with his fists. "You damned fool!"

Fearful exclamations erupted throughout the assembly. Scores of fists were raised, shaking angrily toward T. J. on the rostrum.

"**N**O, sir," Sarah explained. "Mrs. Brent didn't say where she was going. She just left in a hurry, told me to call the other ladies and say she was ill."

Tarl dismissed the maid . . . Marcella would explain when she returned.

He tossed his coat across a chair, loosened his collar and went over to the liquor cabinet. He drank two straight whiskies, started to pour a third, but changed his mind and mixed a scotch and soda instead.

Glass in hand, he slumped on the sofa.

He sipped thoughtfully from the drink . . . This new thing—that idea that everything about him was alive with a vital energy; that an unlimited captive power,

inherent in all substance, was ready to erupt with unimaginable force—was more like a religious fixation than a psychological disorder . . .

Perhaps he *should* give up the business. True, he wasn't thirty yet; but hadn't he already made enough money to retire? There could be a lifelong vacation with Marcella. World tours—Rome—Venice—Rio—The Nile . . . It was all his. His and Marcella's.

. . . The velvet was ruffled by a warm breeze and their howdah swayed rhythmically atop the ponderous animal. Tarl touched Marcella's arm and grasped his rifle. He pointed at the two magnificent beasts crouching on the plain before them. The elephant trumpeted and shied. One of the howdah straps snapped and the carriage shifted precariously . . .

He woke with a start, gripping the arm of the sofa.

Then, smiling, he tried to recapture his train of thoughts . . . The world *was* theirs. They had only to relax and enjoy it and order it around and—

Shouting impulsively, he lunged up and whirled to stare terrified at the sofa, cringing before the impression that it was—alive. Then he fought the awesome suggestion that everything surrounding him was pure, smouldering power in the guise of familiar objects. His eyes, however, remained riveted on the sofa.

It disappeared.

He shouted again and spun to race from the room.

But Sarah stood puzzled in the doorway. "Is there something wrong, sir?"

He turned back toward the sofa . . . It was there again.

And the superficial normalcy had returned to the room.

"I—I fell asleep," he lied. "Guess I had a dream."

T. J. finally quieted the shouting horde and returned order to the assembly room.

But Caldwell, the astronomer, rose again, his large frame trembling.

"You fool!" he whispered caucously. "Have you forgotten that we might *destroy* a world?"

"Nuclear physicists," T. J. reminded, "have it within their power to destroy a world. But they aren't going to stop experimenting."

"But this thing—this power! It's supernatural!"

Their voices had risen gradually until now the entire assembly could hear the conversation.

"*It*—that thing out there," Caldwell went on, exasperated, "can wipe out a galaxy, the universe! That's why he disbanded the Foundation a year ago. We realised we might be stepping the wrong way by trying to protect Brent. We found out then that we had to *leave it alone*!"

Mounting murmurs of dissent gave support to the astronomer.

The Chief Director smiled confidently. "Calling the watchdogs off Brent was logical. I won't argue about that. They were

stumbling all over one another so much that he was beginning to get suspicious . . . But I ask you, why should we try to subdue, to bury and forget a power we might instead be controlling and using for the good of humanity, just like nuclear power?

Some voices rose in protest. But most of the assembly stared ahead anxiously.

"Need I remind you," Dr. August Edman said softly, "that there is individual danger too? The thing could conceivably strike out at any one of us."

T. J. looked down at his hands. "If it does . . ." He shrugged. "Well, that's a chance we take. What great achievement of mankind doesn't come without its personal sacrifices?"

Edman shook his head despairingly.

"As I said," the Chief Director continued, "I have been experimenting. Charles, will you tell them?"

The chauffeur rose, self-consciously brushing his uniform. He was a big man with a square, good natured face.

"Like T. J. says," he explained, "he's been experimenting."

The brunette next to him turned up a startled face.

"I'm sorry Marcella," he said. "I wanted to tell you. But T. J. said it would be better if just the two of us knew about it—until we found out if it was dangerous."

Charles went up on the stage and stood beside the Chief Director. T. J. told me each time he was going to try to contact—

IT. I managed to be with Brent whenever an experiment was performed. There was absolutely no effect on him . . . T. J.'s got something. Evidently he can contact it subconsciously, tap all that power without even disturbing it."

The Chief Director walked to the edge of the stage. "Mrs. Brent, we've been experimenting for six months now. Have you noticed any effects in your husband?"

She remained thoughtfully silent for a while. Finally she shook her head.

"And the third immediate?"

T. J. stared questioningly at the blonde as Charles returned to his seat.

Maude Barton shrugged. "I haven't seen any change in him around the office."

T. J. glanced out over the assembly. "It's all in the approach. The secret is in not being blunt or awkward in nor ordering or demanding—but, rather in being humble and . . . well, I like to think of it as—suppliant."

Langley's head pivoted around. "Damned if you don't make it sound like—God Almighty!"

"I assure you that's not the case. It is capable of evil—as it is of good. I have an experiment on record to prove that."

Saunders, the mathematician, rose at the other end of the table. "All right, T. J., you've been experimenting in contacting the thing and you assure us you're doing it harmlessly . . . So?"

The Chief Director walked to the back of the stage and swept aside a curtain, exposing a table with a microscope coupled to a projector. He flicked a switch and adjusted a lens. A large circle of light steadied in focus on the ceiling. Myriads of rod-shaped bacteria quivered in constant motion within the circle.

"Tubercle bacilli," he explained "Watch."

He lowered his head in concentration.

Slowly, the vacillations of the bacteria became less frantic . . . stopped altogether in the motionlessness of death.

He turned off the projector and closed the curtain. Then he stepped back to the edge of the stage.

"Don't you see the opportunity we're missing? We have here the panacea for all mankind's ill—pathological, moral, sociological, ecological!"

He turned to face the directors. "Tomorrow we can wipe out cancer! Next week we can reclaim the Sahara into a fertile area! If we ever need more land, we can roll back the seas! Next month we can do away with war; we can even wipe away the memory of war!"

There was a hush in the large hall, a hush of growing comprehension.

"Directors and members of the Foundation, listen to me." His coarse, ardent whisper was like thunder through the thick silence. "Dr. Langley says I make the thing sound like God

Almighty. It isn't. But its powers are godlike! And they are ours—to refashion a world!"

Dr. Saunders rose slowly. "What are your plans?"

The Chief Director returned eagerly to his seat. "First, the Foundation is reinstated as of now . . . Next we reorganise for planning and research . . ."

Tarl turned on the porch light and answered the bell, opening the door on Marcella and Charles. They were both laden with packages.

She held the bundles to one side and kissed Tarl lightly on the lips. "Wasn't I lucky, dear? I caught Charles at the garage and didn't have to struggle with all these things by myself."

"Shopping spree?"

"Uh-huh. She turned to the chauffeur. "I'll take them now."

Gathering up the packages from his arms, she started upstairs. "Be right back down."

Charles came in and closed the door behind him. He slapped his pockets until he found a pack of cigarettes and offered one to Tarl. "Am I in for it?" he asked, smiling sheepishly.

Tarl lit their cigarettes. "Not much," he grunted. "One week's pay for an afternoon AWOL. How's that?"

"Okay by me if you sit in on our poker game Saturday night. I'll catch it all back. You play lousy, you know."

Tarl conceded the point with a helpless shrug. Then. "While I'm thinking about it—open your

mouth."

Charles gaped broadly and Tarl stooped to stare in. "Hm-m-m. No bridgework."

"Oh, that . . . It was the only thing I could think of at the time. You know how it is."

"Blonde?"

The chauffeur whistled expressively.

Tarl clapped him warmly on the shoulder. "Give 'em up," he said with mock paternalism. "Or pick one out and settle down. Like I said, whenever you decide to level off, I'll take you into the firm."

"You crazy? Too much fun this way. And nothing to worry about." He opened the door and backed out. "Got to get the car around."

"Come back and have a bite with us. We'll have to scrounge for it; cook's off."

"See you after I wash up."

Tarl went back into the living room and mixed martinis for himself and Marcella. She returned just in time to accept hers and they sat on the sofa.

"Tough day, dear?" she asked.

He stared thoughtfully at the fine lines of her profile, at the highlights that played across her dark hair like moonlight on a waterfall as she turned toward him. Suddenly he realised how much he needed her—even more now than when they were married.

He nodded belately to her question.

"Come home early, didn't you?" she went on.

"At one. Expected to find a house full of babbling females."

"Oh, I called the meeting off."

"That was unusual, wasn't it?"

"I just didn't feel like being surrounded by a room full of yak-ki-yak."

"Sarah said something urgent came up."

"Well, it—it did. You see . . . Tarl, fix me another martini please."

He stared obliquely at her as he went to the liquor cabinet. "Don't you want to tell me what the emergency was?"

She laughed curtly and came to stand beside him. "Of course, dear. I was just wondering whether the women will find out I called the meeting off for practically nothing at all. Then they would put me down on their snob list."

"Why did you cancel the meeting?"

"I lost a filling this morning."

His tone became solicitous. "Did you see the dentist?"

She nodded. "And then I had the rest of the day to myself," she mumbled indistinctly as she thumped a lower molar with her curving forefinger.

He stopped stirring the gin and vermouth long enough to light a cigarette. Then he poured the drink. But as he offered it to her, he jerked his hand back and the glass shattered on the floor.

Trembling, he turned away while she stopped to pick up the pieces . . . The furniture was *alive* again—vacillating imperceptibly! Rigid with apprehen-

sion, he closed his eyes.

"Clumsy," Marcella berated jokingly. Then, "Tarl—what's wrong?"

He started as she touched his shoulder. Then the impossible impression of inchoate, omnipresent power was gone.

He brought his left hand up, still holding the cigarette. "Burned myself," he lied.

CHAPTER TWO

"WE'VE made encouraging strides in the past week, gentlemen," T. J. was saying.

He paused to stare at the twelve other men crowded into the observatory atop the Foundation building. "I believe that for the present, though, we should restrict our activities to the four main categories of science, medicine, geopolitics and sociology."

The directors shifted restlessly—all except Caldwell, the astronomer. He was adjusting the focus of a small reflector telescope that was aimed through its slot in the domical roof.

"Tonight," the Chief Director went on, "our purpose is in the nature of a final test. If it is successful we will get on with the first application of Project Utopia."

"Let me get this straight." It was Dr. Benjamin Crossett, directory of chemistry who spoke up. "We are going to—think a star out of existence?"

"For the test, yes. Success will

give us proof of the power that can be achieved through group effort."

"We think with *Its* faculties," the chemist mused aloud.

"What other way is there to think—or exist, Dr. Crossett?" T. J. replied.

He faced the others. "We all know the identity of the star, gentlemen. It is an obscure one that probably won't be missed for some time . . . Ready yet, Dr. Caldwell?"

The astronomer grunted negatively, not taking his eye from the lens. "Trouble with clouds."

The directors milled around, forming small conversational groups. Langley, the physicist, came over to T. J.

"I understand," he said, "that there were complications when all three of the immediates were missing at the same time last week?"

"Nothing serious," the Chief Director assured. "He didn't even connect them. They all managed to have excuses."

"Suppose Brent would have gotten suspicious and started checking into the coincidence?"

"I'll admit it was a mistake," T. J. conceded. "It won't happen again. Anyway, we want the immediates with Brent so we can keep tab on him."

Langley smiled mockingly. "Worried something might go wrong?"

"Of course not! Some of us aren't convinced what we're doing is safe. I've ordered intermittent surveillance just to satisfy them."

The physicist's face became grim with apprehension. "But suppose we're wrong, T. J.? Suppose our interference affects him? Suppose there's a reaction and conscious impulses reach down from him to disturb the thing? don't you realise there's no place we can hide? *No place in the entire universe!*"

Indignantly, the Chief Director stiffened. "My experiments show that *won't* happen."

"But have those experiments been really conclusive?"

Caldwell threw in the drive clutch and turned from the telescope. "It's all set up."

T. J. was first to look at the bright star in the centre of the field. It was flanked on one side by a crescent-shaped formation of smaller luminaries and on the other by the haze of a more distant nebula's fringe.

He stepped back so the others could take their turns. When they had finished he confronted them. "We have been briefed on the procedure. The principal thing to remember is, that we must imagine the star never existed . . . Shall we have a try at it?"

The directors lowered their heads in concentration. And for a moment T. J. thought they looked much like a group in solemn prayer.

CALDWELL turned back to the telescope first.

"It's gone!" he shouted.

T. J. smiled. "Now gentlemen," he said beratingly. "We shouldn't be surprised over that, should we?"

After all, a star is such a small unit of creation."

He went forward and peered into the eyepiece. Only the crescent formation of stars and the edge of the nebula were there. He backed away and Crossett took his turn.

"But we must be disturbing it in some way!" the chemist insisted looking up from the instrument. "We were in direct contact just then, weren't we?"

T. J. shook his head. "Not in direct contact. We went indirectly — through its subconscious — so subtly that there was no danger of disturbing the thing and releasing all its destructive power."

The telephone rang on a table in the corner and T. J. answered it in subdued tones. After he hung up, he faced the others.

"That was a report from Brent's wife. She wanted to know if we had completed the first test.

"Did he show any reaction?"

Caldwell asked anxiously. "Brent has been asleep for two hours. He hasn't even stirred. Does that make you feel any more confident?"

"Not until we get our reports from research," Edman, the medical director, gruffed.

"Research is already on the job, checking a thousand and one phenomena: performing another thousand and one experiments to see whether there are any changes in the basic laws of nature that might indicate the thing is arousing. Naturally, it will be days before we get a complete re-

port. But the critical tests will all be performed within the hour."

Caldwell closed the dome's slot and Saunders turned up the lights in the observatory.

"Any objections to getting along with the first project of Operation Utopia?" T. J. asked.

"Very well then . . . There's a tribal area in Southern Nigeria about a hundred miles inland on the West African coast. We have an agent there checking on reports of a sleeping sickness epidemic."

He unfurled a map and thumbtacked it on the wall. "This is the area," he continued, drumming the spot with a stiff finger.

"The outbreak is intense. But we're not going to cure the afflicted; that may come later. Instead, we're going to check the spread of the disease. Our objective will be to set fly, carrier of the *trypanosome*."

CALDWELL wrapped both hands around the tall glass and leaned forward across the table so he could be more clearly heard above the blattancy of the orchestra.

"You know, Dr. Edman, we directors haven't gotten to know each other very well, have we?"

Edman, the medical director, slipped from his drink. Unlike the astronomer, he was a lean man with spare grey hair who completely lacked the vitality of the stargazer.

"That isn't surprising," he agreed. "T. J.'s kept us pretty

busy in our own departments. There hasn't been much time for amenities."

The astronomer smiled. "Which is entirely unjustified . . . That's one of the reasons I asked you out for this drink after we got through with the African business."

Edman studied him intently, "And the other reason?"

Caldwell leaned back, returning the medical man's appraising stare. "You know," he suggested abruptly, "it's rather unfortunate that the Foundation is dedicated to a non-profitable use of that thing's power. I could think of a score of other uses — profitable ones."

The physician leaned forward interested. "I'm listening, Dr. Caldwell."

"I figured you would. That's the second reason I asked you out for the drink."

"What are your ideas?"

"I'm convinced T. J. has found the secret of tapping the thing's power without any harmful results."

Edman frowned. "But suppose he's not bluffing? Suppose repeated selfish manipulation of the thing could arouse it, just as Brent's becoming aware of it could? Then . . . poof!" His hands gestured explosively.

"Wrong again — perhaps on both points," the astronomer objected. "First, repeated selfish use has no effect. I know. I've been experimenting secretly too."

Edman stared.

"Second," Caldwell went on.

"I'm sure the basic premise of the Foundation — the premise that if Brent becomes aware of the thing it will awaken — has been unfounded all along. I can't agree that a single individual can decide the fate of an entire universe."

The physician slumped pensively in his chair. "What do you propose, Dr. Caldwell?"

"No individual or single institution has an option on controlling it. For that matter, there's no reason why it can't be under the direction of two, or even more controlling forces at the same time."

Edman smiled broadly. "I can see you've been rather busy, doctor."

"Like the proverbial beaver, no less. And I've found out, like T.J., that I can help too."

"A clean break? Another Foundation?"

"Nothing that open. There's no reason why we can't continue with Operation Utopia while we further our own interest at the same time."

Edman nodded meditatively. "I've in mind a large section of range-land in Western Oklahoma," Caldwell went on. "I've already bought into some of it —"

"And you need capital to continue the acquisition?" the physician asked misgivingly. "Oh no, Dr. Edman. 'You'll be surprised to learn how easy it is to get money through it' — in small amounts, of course, so as not to arouse any suspicion . . . After we acquire the rest of the area and get rid of the poachers,

we arrange a miracle."

"Such as—?"

"I rather like the idea of discovering the world's largest vein of uranium ore."

There was applause in Edman's eyes. "We do it undercover, of course."

"Naturally. Purchasers to front for us, dummy corporations—all that. It wouldn't do for any of us to be connected with that type of thing."

The physician stared askance. "Any of us?"

"There are others. But you and I are the only directors."

Edman was alarmed. "You mean you've gone outside the Foundation?"

Caldwell shook his head. "I've been able to cull as many as I need from the organisation. You'd be amazed at how many people like power and wealth, especially when they can reasonably believe no hazard is involved."

The other frowned. "Suppose T. J. finds out? Suppose we're discovered?"

"That's a chance we take. But look at it this way—a single effort of concerted will, directed through it, can destroy the Foundation and every member in it."

"Quite true," Edman admitted soberly.

"The uranium bonanza will be our operational test. After that we'll plot a more detailed course."

Caldwell glanced toward the main glass door of the lounge. Wind whipped newspapers along the sidewalk while the buildings

across the street were intermittently illuminated by distant flashes of lightning.

"If we hurry," he said, "we can get to our headquarters before the storm. I want you to meet some of the others."

Edman rose and reached into his pocket.

But Caldwell stayed the gesture with a wave of his hand. Then he nodded toward a vacant space next to the ash tray on the table.

A five dollar bill materialised.

The astronomer shrugged. "I've been practising," he smiled. "But let's get out of here . . . Last time I did that someone started shouting he'd been robbed."

GUSTS of wind rustled the drapes and Tarl snapped erect in bed. He watched the play of thunderless lightning along the suburban horizon. It was principally an electrical storm—a distant one.

He glanced at Marcella—still asleep—then put on his robe and slippers and went over to close the French windows. But instead he walked out on the veranda and felt in his pocket for a cigarette. Leaning on the railing at the edge of the tiled area, he smoked languidly while he stared up at the low clouds scampering by.

A rift passed overhead and he glanced through it at a handful of stars. In relative motion, they seemed to be racing past the rift, rather than the reverse . . . springing up from nowhere, flaring briefly in an ephemeral life, and dashing to oblivion behind

the next bank of clouds.

He closed his eyes and the train of thought continued . . . stars racing to their destruction—not stars, but *one star*. One particular star. One that had existed for billions of years—yet, paradoxically had never existed at all.

He went down the tile steps and out onto the damp lawn; walked listlessly along a row of shrubbery, plucking petals indifferently and grinding them between his fingers.

The vanishing star welled again in his thoughts. Now, with his eyes tightly shut he was staring at a whole universe of stars . . . Only they were being snuffed out as though by the hand of a god. But as fast as they were extinguished, another force ordered them back into existence.

It was like a struggle—that might hold the fate of a universe at stake! On the one hand was a power—an intellect that had lain dormant for millions, perhaps billions of years. On the other side was . . . He couldn't remember. Momentarily stalled, the elusive trend of thought lurched into motion again . . . If the sleeping intellect awoke—if it awoke . . . He couldn't force development of the concept.

He turned and stared back at the house, limned eerily in the lightning of the approaching storm.

The house disappeared.

He reeled back, staring aghast at the naked mound of earth that had supported it. The shrubbery and flower beds were still there. The garage and the living quar-

ters above the automobile stalls were unchanged . . . But the house was gone!

Marcella! he thought frantically. Good God! Marcella! The house rematerialised.

Bewildered, he let the wind whip his clothing about him, hardly noticing the light go on in the chauffeur's quarters.

It wasn't until a robed form stepped off the driveway and came in his direction that his eyes left the house.

It was Charles.

"You out for air too, boss?" The chauffeur drew up in front of him, his grin etched more vividly by the flickering lightning.

"Not for long." Tarl held his palm up, feeling for raindrops that would soon be there. "We'd better get back in, or we'll have to run for it."

But Charles caught his arm before he could walk away. "Tarl, how've you been feeling lately?"

Tarl drew back hesitantly.

"I mean—well, you had that trouble last year. Remember?" The chauffeur laughed lightly. "When you were being 'followed'?"

"I remember," Tarl snapped.

Charles gaped awkwardly at the belligerent response. "Hell, I didn't mean any harm. We've laughed about it a dozen times since then, haven't we? I was just wondering whether you've ever felt anything like that since."

Tarl forced an obliging smile. "No, I've been fine."

CHAPTER THREE

OMINOUS whispering spread the length of the conference table, as Marcella entered hesitantly. T. J. rose to meet her.

She came up on the stage and took a chair next to the Chief Director.

"What's wrong?" she demanded.

"Nothing!" sneered Crosset, the chemist.

Marcella only frowned more deeply.

"I asked you over," T. J. explained, "so we could have a first-hand report on Tarl. Have you noticed any reaction lately?"

"Nothing," she shook her head slowly. "Everything's the same . . . Is there something wrong, T. J.?"

"Where is he now?"

"At the office."

"And the third immediate—is she on the job?"

"I spoke with Maud only an hour ago. I wish you'd tell me whether—"

"And the second immediate?" Saunders, the mathematician, interrupted.

"Charles," T. J. admitted, "is not with him. He's straightening out communications details. We're short in that department at the moment."

Marcella glanced around the table. "Won't somebody please tell me what's happened?"

Langley, the physicist, wiped his broad brow with a handkerchief. "You're quite sure, Mrs.

Brent, that he's given no indication over the past few days—"

T. J. slapped the table. "I tell you none of the immediates has noticed anything!"

The physician kept his eyes focused soberly on Marcella. "You know as well as I do, Mrs. Brent, that we can't possibly be too cautious. If *it* should stir; if *it* should unleash all that power; or if your husband should become aware of the thing . . ."

"Something did happen!" Marcella tensed. "What was it? Tell me!"

T. J. turned toward her. "That epidemic in Nigeria. We brought it completely under check. Of course, we won't have proof until after we allow for the incubation period. But—"

"But something else happened?" she prodded.

He nodded glumly. "A new epidemic—not sleeping sickness. Something that causes a twenty-four hour blindness, then paralysis and death."

Marcella sighed in relief. "Then it has nothing to do with Tarl if he hasn't shown any reaction so far."

Langley rose and leaned determinedly on the table. "Everything, Mrs. Brent, that ever happens anywhere at any time has something to do with your husband!"

"But I mean it's nothing he's responsible for. Nothing *it's* responsible for through him."

T. J. laughed emotionlessly. "They're supposed to be scientists, my dear. But still they're mis-

guided by superstition and fear. Whenever something goes wrong, they jump up and shout, '*It's* responsible!' They can't understand that through our lack of knowledge *we* may be to blame for the unanticipated result."

Caldwell hunched forward on the table, defiance in his attitude. "All right, T. J. what's your explanation?"

"A simple one. This new disease didn't result from our use of *Its* power. It would have happened if we had gone into Nigeria with spray guns and killed each tsetse fly individually . . . Our research wasn't thorough enough. We didn't take into consideration the total ecology of the area—the interdependence of species.

"We forget that killing off one life form has its effects on an untold number of other species—like a chain reaction. They're all interdependent. We'll probably find that the tsetse fly, besides spreading sleeping sickness, holds in check another species that carries the germ responsible for this new disease. In killing the fly we invited the new epidemic."

THE Directors mulled over the hypothesis.

T. J. handed Marcella a envelope. "We won't need you any longer, my dear. Will you take this up to Charles on the fifth floor? It's a list of new contact frequencies and code designations."

After she had gone, he stood up and began pacing alongside the table. "You see, what's happened

in Nigeria was in no way related to any reaction on Brent's part. As a matter of fact, I'm beginning to think that it might not make any difference even if Brent knew about *It*."

Confused, several of the directors sprang up, all trying to speak at once. But it was Langley's voice that rose above the others:

"Haven't we always believed that if Brent ever found out about it, that would mean the end of everything?"

Saunders, polishing his glasses on the silk lining of his tie, asked, "Didn't you say the association between him and the thing is absolute?"

T. J. sighed. "We've agreed this is a point-universe, haven't we? Space, distance, motion, entity—all are illusionary. No individual or object is separated from Brent by even the smallest unit of measurement. Anything seemingly to the contrary is in the nature of an hallucination . . . Carry that reasoning a step further: If we co-exist with him, then *he* can't be associated with it to a greater degree than *any* of us."

Saunders sprang up, exasperated. "Then why all this concern over Brent's finding out? Why not isolate—Edman here? Why not say Edman is associated with it? Why not take precautions to see that Edman himself, doesn't become suspicious?"

"Why not?" T. J. repeated thoughtfully. "Because we blundered originally in not realising that everything is basi-

cally subjective. When we discovered *It*, we assumed it must be associated with someone. Somehow, we forced that relationship on Brent accidentally. And now we're stuck with it—at least until we find out how to rescind an association we've already established."

Crossett laughed hollowly. "Let it stay with Brent. I wouldn't care to have it leaping from one person to another, with us chasing around trying to locate it."

"With sufficient research," T. J. offered, "I suspect we may someday disprove the misconception that it has to be connected with somebody. We don't know enough about it yet, however. I'm grateful that thus far we've been fortunate enough to determine the dimensionless nature of the universe."

"What proof do you have of that?" It was the mathematician, still unconvinced, who shot the question.

"The Nigerian experiment," T. J. explained. "Nigeria is here. We are in Nigeria. Nigeria is in the tip of this cylinder of graphite." He held up his pencil. "Just as the tip of this pencil encompasses us, Nigeria, the world, the universe. If there were any distinction, if distance and entity were anything but an illusion, we couldn't sit here and dictate a reaction a third of the way around the world."

Caldwell broke the studied silence. "What are we going to do about those natives?"

"I think we'll have to re-

populate the area with tsetse flies—and leave medical applications alone until we've gone more thoroughly into projective research."

Saunders finished cleaning his glasses and put them on. "It all seems so futile. . . . How can we ever expect to do sufficient research on any project to pre-conceive *all* the unanticipated results?"

"Let's not look on this as a defeat," T. J. encouraged. "Just a minor setback. Anyway, there are so many other fields we can work in. We'll tackle the second project as soon as we correct our first experiment. I propose that we get along with both undertakings now."

"And what is the second project in Operation Utopia?" Crossett asked.

"Geopolitical." The Chief Director spread a map on the table and the others left their chairs to crowd around him.

"Egypt." He dotted the centre of the map with his finger. "Right above the Red Sea and just across the Israel border. . . ."

The finger shifted. " . . . The Nagev desert. We're going to transform that desert into the most fertile land area in the world. It's small enough for experimental purposes, large enough to get decisive results."

Langley frowned. "But what will happen when the Israeli discover a garden where there was nothing but sand?"

The Chief Director smiled. "It may trouble them a bit. But I

don't think they'll reject it. Anyway, people have to get used to the miracles of Utopia sometime, don't they.

WHEN they left for the smaller conference room on the top floor, Caldwell and Edman lagged behind.

Caldwell laid a hand on the physician's shoulder as they walked down the long corridor. "T. J.'s starting to come around to my way of thinking."

"About Brent?"

The astronomer nodded. "He's finally discarded the idea of an absolute association between Brent and the thing. If he keeps at it, I'm sure he'll find out that the association doesn't even have to be dispelled—that Brent's relationship with it isn't any more critical than yours or mine."

They walked in silence for a moment.

"Incidentally, that land acquisition's gone through," Caldwell said softly.

"Already?"

"Of course," the astronomer boasted. "I had most of the groundwork laid a week ago when I took you in. I told you I didn't need any financial support—just competent brains."

"We're meeting tonight?"

"And tomorrow we'll have more uranium ore than the rest of the world put together."

"Wonderful!" Edman exulted.

But Caldwell shook his head dourly. "I'm disappointed. Of course, it was convenient to provide for all the capital we'll ever

be able to use. But hell, we're just puddling! We aren't going to lose any time in stepping on to bigger things."

They turned into the main corridor. Ahead, the last of the other directors was stepping into the elevator.

"Personal power." Caldwell uttered the word with an infection that was almost reverential.

"But how?" The physician stared quizzically at him.

"Order and acceptance of a new system come out of chaos. We will create that chaos and let it smoulder while we take our time in climbing to a position of dominance. . . . Naturally, the Foundation will eventually get in our way. But with the element of surprise on our side, we can easily do away with T. J. and the others and their Operation Utopia, can't we?"

Edman was gaping in alarm. "But—chaos! We can't tamper with *It* that way! We can't—"

"I didn't mean supernatural chaos, Dr. Edman."

They drew up in front of the elevator and the astronomer punched the button.

"I mean man-made chaos," he explained. "Global war would suit our purpose."

"But how can we do *that*?" the physician asked dubiously.

The elevator door opened and they entered. Caldwell pressed the button for the top floor.

"Oh, we won't just step in and order a nuclear war. Nothing as blunt as that. We'll just wait for a likely incident and give it a

little push in the right direction."

"But—global war!"

"Just what we want. Almost complete destruction. Then the new order . . . By the way, Dr. Edman, be at the meeting early tonight. I have a surprise. We've swung another member of the Foundation to our side—one of the immediates."

"I SAID you'll have to cancel my appointments, Maude. I'm leaving for the afternoon."

"But—but you can't, Mister Brent!"

"And why not?"

"That conference on the West—son matter! And—Charles has the afternoon off! He can't pick you up before six."

"I don't need Charles. I need some exercise and sunshine. I'll get home all right."

"But all that correspondence!"

Tarl smiled patiently. "You take care of it. If you run into anything you can't handle, ask Jones what to do."

The blonde flushed; rose hastily from her desk. "I'll go with you. I ought to get away from the office too."

"You stay here and get that correspondence out." He put on his hat and left.

Maud crossed hastily to the private telephone. She dialled a number and waited. Then, "Put me through to the Chief Director."

After a brief wait, "T. J., he's not being watched. He's gone."

"Where?" the Chief wanted to

know.

"Out for a walk, I guess. He said he needed some sunshine."

"How was he acting?"

"All right, I guess. No sign of anything."

"Then I wouldn't worry too much about it; we're through with the heavy stuff for today. Besides we're just watching for the other directors' benefit. They're inclined to exaggerate the peril. I'm convinced there isn't any danger at all. If anything was going to happen, it would have happened by now."

He hung up.

Without replacing the receiver, she dialled another number in the same exchange.

"Mister Shields?—I've got to talk with Dr. Caldwell. Quick."

She waited again, then, "Dr. Caldwell, you told me to let you know if he got out of sight. He left about ten minutes ago."

"And you're just calling now?"

"I had to tell T. J."

His voice became harsh. "I told you to call me first!"

"Then I'd have to explain the delay to T. J. . . It isn't easy keeping track of him for so sure people. Anyway, if we're so sure everything is going to be all right, why are we watching him at all?"

"I've explained that," the astronomer said patiently. "We're certain there's no danger of his disturbing it by becoming aware of it. However, quite the opposite may be true—with us manipulating it so freely, impulses may start getting through from it to

him. He may find out about it and learn how to use its powers. If that happens, he can become as much a problem to us as the Foundation is. We'll want to know about it the minute he starts reacting."

She was silent for a while. "I don't like all this. It seems like a three-way double-cross. And I don't know but when I might be doing something dangerous."

"You want millions, don't you?"

"I—I suppose so."

"Then you've got to work for it. You've got to take chances . . . And we couldn't possibly allow anyone to leave our group now—you realise that, don't you?"

She squared her shoulders. "Well, what do I do now? It's too late to follow him."

"He's being followed. He was picked up outside the building the moment he left."

TARL read Marcella's note informing him that she had a late appointment with the hair dresser. Then he put on his gardening clothes and went out to the flower beds on the west side of the house.

But, trowel hanging at the end of a limp arm, he leaned reflectively against a tree . . . Should he tell Marcella? Should he tell her he believed he could make things vanish and reappear?

But had it really happened? Or had he only imagined the phenomenon? Suppose it was all mental? Suppose he went blurt- ing to her about it and insisted

on a demonstration . . . and it would prove to be only his personal hallucination?

He let his eyes rove across the grounds—so green and lush, so simple and unaffected. If only he could be surrounded by the real things, the natural things all the time!

Even now there was another area turning green, (the thought intruded subtly, so subtly that he wasn't even aware of its inception) becoming as luxuriant as his garden . . . a barren area . . . a desert . . .

It was almost dark in the garden and headlights suddenly shone on the driveway. The limousine came to a stop abreast of him on the other side of the hedge. Charles and Marcella, both sitting in the front seat, were vague shadows. He started around the shrubbery to meet them.

" . . . But suppose he finds out?" he heard Marcella say.

Charles laughed. "Don't worry. He won't. We've managed to keep it from him this long. There isn't any reason why we can't go on."

"I don't know. He might get suspicious. We've got to stop going off together."

"You may be right there. It would be uncomfortable if he started asking questions."

"Or he might even follow us!"

"Well, be more careful, starting now. You go on in before he gets home. I'll go off and kill an hour or two, then make a separate appearance."

Dumbfounded, Tarl shrank back behind the hedge.

"HE made it disappear, I tell you!" The man's excited voice cracked even more tinnily over the telephone. "The arbour, the bench, the vine—the whole damned thing! He just waved his hand and it was gone. Then he waved his hand again and it came back!"

Caldwell slumped in the soft chair, balancing the receiver between his shoulder and ear. "I know. I saw part of it."

"You were there too?"

"Let's say—in essence, yes. There are other properties of the intellect's powers that we're just starting to explore. One of them is what we might call extended perception. I've accidentally tapped in on it twice. I think Brent has too."

The man swore incredulously. "Then you won't need us any more." The words may have been either sincere or sarcastic.

"On the contrary," Caldwell corrected. "I want you to stay with him at all times. Make sure you arrange for relief before you let him out of your sight. Make sure you have a radiophone-equipped car so we can keep in touch."

"You think he'll develop more power?"

"I'm afraid so—just like I have; just like T. J. would have if he hadn't gotten stalled on his humanitarian projects."

"But what are we going to do

if he starts finding out—*really* finding out?"

"When I tell you, we'll kill him. But first we want to be *damned* sure the association is subjective and his death won't have any effect on the thing's slumber."

CHAPTER FOUR

MARCELLA poured them both another cup of coffee at the breakfast table.

"Anything wrong at the office, dear?" she asked casually. "You haven't had much to say the past couple of days."

When she glanced up, he tried to conceal the fact he had been staring at her.

"Trouble with some of the accounts," he clipped.

"Anything I'd understand if we talked about it?"

He shook his head curtly, then raised the morning paper as a barrier against continued questioning. Headlines of border skirmishes in the Middle East and war clouds over the Arabian world were only vague, meaningless words before his eyes.

Marcella and Charles. Charles and Marcella. Still it was incredible . . . Perhaps not so incredible after all. Charles was genial, open-minded, sincere, vital and handsome in the rugged sort of way that so many women find appealing. He had no vague disorders, no neuroses, no complexes.

"Thought I'd do some shopping today, darling," she announced. "Is there anything you

need?"

He folded the paper roughly and rose.

"Off so soon, Tarl?"

Without answering, he kissed her lightly on the cheek. Then he felt her perplexed stare on his back as he hurried from the room.

In his study, he phoned the office and got the telephone receptionist.

"Miss Barton in yet?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"When she gets there tell her I won't be down for a few days."

"But you can't take time off now!" she protested. "Haven't you read the papers? War's about to break out in the Middle East!"

"Let it break."

"But it'll mean all kinds of transactions for the office—buying, selling—"

"Let Jones handle it."

He hung up and hurried out to the garage where he started up the sports car. When he backed out, Charles was coming down the stairs from his quarters.

"Hey, Tarl!" he shouted, starting forward on the run. "Wait!"

Tarl swung the car around and sent it lunging down the driveway.

SAUNDERS, at the other end of the conference table, held a hand up to steady his glasses while he gestured wildly.

"What went wrong?" he demanded, thumping his fist on the table.

T. J. shook his head hopelessly. "I don't know."

"Well, I do!" Langley, the physicist, sprang out of his chair. "We just don't know any more about geopolitics than we did about medicine! If we'd done any competent historical research, we'd have known all that's in the headlines today." He held up a newspaper and rapped it with his knuckles.

Dr. Crossett rose unsteadily across the table. "I haven't read it."

Langley pointed to the front page. "All that we should have known before we tried the Nagev desert project is in this background article. It tells how the desert area has been the centre of a dispute between Israel and Egypt for fifteen years. If we'd known that we could have foreseen this war."

T. J. motioned for attention. "You see," he added, "Egypt had a weak claim on the area. They didn't press it because the land was nothing but desert."

"But now," Langley resumed, "it isn't a desert any longer. It's a vital, rich area. It might have gotten that way miraculously, but what nation's going to question a miracle when there's profit involved? Egypt did what any nation with a claim might do . . . They marched in."

Saunders, the mathematician, paced at his end of the table. "But I understand it was just a border incident."

Langley laughed. "A border incident with four divisions involved? And with an Arab army marching north to protect their

interests?"

Sullen silence descended on the group. Caldwell glanced over at Edman. The physician returned the stare. Somehow they seemed less disturbed than the others.

T. J. sat with his head lowered, helplessly surveying his moist palms. Deep furrows of indecision had formed in his forehead and he ran a hand through his dishevelled hair.

"Langley's right," he admitted weakly. "Insufficient research. Geopolitics is another field we'll have to shy away from until we examine our methods of preparation more thoroughly."

Saunders took off his glasses to polish them. "The important thing now is that we do something about the Nagev area."

"Turn it back into a desert?" suggested Crossett, the chemist.

T. J. looked up. "Impossible. The incident has already occurred. The divisions are engaged in battle. Regardless of whether the prize remains, the fight will go on."

A door at the side of the stage burst open and a man rushed in. A sheet of paper fluttered in his hand.

"We got a report from Henderson in Saudi Arabia! The five biggest oil refineries were blown up. Nuclear bombs!"

A concussion of exclamations swept over the table.

T. J. took the report.

The courier leaned over the table and stared ominously at the directors. "They were blown up by Russian planes! Two of the

hundred bombers were caught in the explosions and crashed."

The directors stared uncomprehendingly at one another.

T. J. placed the paper on the table gingerly, as though he were handling a death warrant. "What's happened seems obvious to me . . . Russia saw a chance to sneak in a blow against the Western oil reserves. With Arab troops going to the border, the attack on the refineries would be blamed either on Egypt or Israel."

"Only," Saunders added, "they didn't figure on getting caught by having their planes crash at the refineries."

It was Langley who rose with a stark expression. "Gentlemen," he said dolefully, "we've caused what might very well become a global war!"

The other directors hunched forward tensely over the table . . . all except two. The astronomer and the physician leaned back and exchanged brief glances.

Crossett lurched up. "But didn't you say we could stop wars?" The chemist stared imploringly at T. J. "Can't we stop this one?"

The Chief Director shook his head apologetically. "I meant we could stop wars by removing the causes. It's possible we may eventually be able to stop wars while they're in progress—after we've experimented more. But I can't see any way of doing it now."

CALDWELL and Edman sat in the back seat of the auditorium smoking. Most of the other directors were still on the stage clustered around the table.

"The Israel-Egypt incident was made to order, wasn't it?" the physician said.

Caldwell grinned. "Yes, indeed, Dr. Edman. And very conveniently, by our own Foundation here."

"I'll bet the Kremlin was as surprised as T. J."

"Over finding two of their planes in Saudi Arabia and some of their nuclear devices missing?"

Edman nodded smugly.

The astronomer shrugged. "Just one of the convenient aspects of a point-universe. That training squadron may have been over the Caspian Sea. But it was over Saudi Arabia, too—just as surely as it was under Washington and in your vest pocket at the same time."

"What do you suppose will happen now?" the physician asked. "Internationally, I mean."

"All the defence packs will go into effect. The whole Middle East and Europe is tied together in a web of mutual assistance commitments . . . I'd rather guess it's going to be a good one."

"What do we do?"

"Sit on the sidelines—for a while. Let it smoulder. See how long it'll be before we get sucked in . . . When we determine which side is going to come out ahead, then we can lay our plans accordingly."

"No rush?"

"No rush," Caldwell assured. "We want plenty of worldwide chaos first . . . Oh, incidentally, we have assayars swarming all over that range land. And Washington has classified the uranium discovery as top secret—to our benefit. I guess they don't want the area dusted with radioactive cobalt if we're drawn into a war."

Edman stared ahead abstractedly, an amused smile on his lips. "All I can say is that we surely touched off some spectacular nuclear explosions."

"Not we, Dr. Edman—It."

The double doors swung open behind them and a tall figure raced down the aisle. It was the chauffeur.

"Brent's gone!" he shouted. "He's disappeared!"

Charles lunged up on the stage and drew up in front of T. J. "He left. We don't know why! We don't know where he is!"

T. J. winced. "How was he? Did he show any signs?"

"Marcella says he was a little sullen this morning. But you didn't say sullenness would be one of the signs that it was breaking loose."

"It's not one of the signs."

Edman and Caldwell walked slowly up the aisle and stood at the foot of the stage staring up.

"But where is he?" Langley demanded.

Charles spread his hands hopelessly.

"Then how in hell are we going to know what's happening to him?" the physicist erupted. He turned angrily on T. J. "How do

we know he isn't responsible for the war complications? How do we know your idea about a forced subjective association isn't wrong?"

"Yes," Saunders added angrily, "how do we know the relationship isn't absolute?"

The Chief Director's face reddened. "Quit blaming it on him! He's got nothing to do with it—regardless of whether he's out of our sight or not. What's happening here is the same thing that happened with the tsetse fly affair. We're responsible for not collecting sufficient data—not Brent!"

"But what'll we do about him?" Langley persisted.

"Nothing! I'm damned tired of proving he's harmless. I'm tired of leading you around by the hands; of trying to convince you we've bypassed him completely in our methods!"

The other directors covered before T. J.'s determined outburst.

"We'll find him," the Chief Director relented wearily. "Even if just to satisfy the doubters . . . Charles, take all the agents in Standby and find out where Brent is. Get him back under constant surveillance."

Charles left and T. J. returned to his chair. "Now let's get back to the problem at hand and see what we can do about that war in the Middle East—if anything."

Caldwell and the physician climbed the stairs and headed for their places at the table.

"Raleigh still on Brent's trail?" Edman whispered.

The astronomer nodded. "He's in constant touch with Shields. Shields will find a way to let us know if anything develops."

LATER that afternoon, it was a haggard group of men who sat wearily around the table, now cluttered with scores of brown-stained cups and saucers.

T. J.'s collar was spread wide and his tie limp and askew. Shirt sleeves rolled up, he paced behind his chair, pausing occasionally to stare helplessly at the others.

Abruptly, Langley, the physicist, sprang up, sweeping cups and saucers off the table with a wave of his arm.

"I've got it! I've found the solution!"

The directors stared hopefully at him.

"Look at it this way," he went on. "It determines all basic laws of nature. Working through the thing, imposing our will on its subconscious, we can modify those laws . . . *Suppose we modify the nuclear principle governing chain reaction?*"

The directors were thoughtfully silent.

"Don't you see?" he challenged. "Russia will suddenly find herself with a lot of nuclear devices that are only *duds*! That won't touch off a single click in a radiation counter . . . So will England, the United States, every country in the world!"

"Will any of them risk war then?" He rapped the table. "They will not! They will all think the *other side* has found a

way—force field or stasis field, if you will—to disarm nuclear stockpiles! Who would wage war under those conditions?"

Hope flared exuberantly on the faces of the others.

But T. J. was still skeptical. "How will we do it?"

"We can phrase our directive to the effect that atoms will be incapable of disintegration."

"Without qualifying it at all?"

Langley hesitated. "Oh," he said glumly. "All right, then, we'll stipulate that the directive will hold except in the case of natural processes necessary for the propagation of light and other electromagnetic phenomena . . . We'll do even better than that—we'll narrow it down to a simple prohibition of chain reaction."

"I don't know . . ." T. J. was still reluctant.

The other stared indecisively at one another—expectantly at the physicist and the Chief Director.

T. J. sighed finally. "All right. It's worth a try. Let's go up to the other conference room." He nodded distastefully toward their cluttered table.

Hurriedly, they left for the top floor.

TARL steered the car around a sharp curve on the mountain road. The stretch straightened out and levelled off and the sun, big and orange and low on the horizon, settled beyond his windshield.

Ahead was the cabin and solitude. All the essentials he needed were there—changes of clothing,

food in the refrigerator. Already he could see the red tile of its roof flashing through the foliage.

Squinting against the sunlight, he reached up to adjust the visor.

The sun faded from a brilliant orange to a dull red and disappeared.

Darkness enveloped him instantly and he stomped down on the brake pedal. The car skidded wildly; plunged into the ditch and out again, and spun around violently.

The full moon, low on the opposite horizon, swung into view briefly . . . and disappeared, like a spotlight being extinguished.

The car came to a stop and Tarl sat there gripping the wheel in terror. He got out and clung to the open door. He concentrated fervently—alone and feeling like a child in the dark.

"Come back!" he whispered frantically, staring to the east and then to the west.

Nothing happened.

The dark remained and the stars grew in brilliance as his eyes adjusted. Fighting panic, he calmed himself deliberately . . . An illusion of night—replete with an hallucination of stars.

Was it possible? Experimentally, he turned on the automobile headlights. They illuminated the road as brightly as they ever had.

Dazed, he got into the car and drove on to the lodge.

THE stairs were directly behind T. J.'s chair at the smaller conference table. Consequently, he was the first to

grope up them in the sudden darkness and stumble out onto the roof. There was only confusion and fear in the tumult of voices that swept along after him like the wave wash of a ship.

It was dark on the roof—horribly dark. The Chief Director staggered toward the parapet and stared out at the western sky. There was no indication that a sun had been in full view well above the horizon only seconds earlier. There wasn't even the vestigial glow of twilight.

Someone stumbled toward him from the observatory.

"It's gone!" the man rasped in fear. "Just like that star, it's vanished! I was looking at the sun, then all of a sudden it wasn't there any longer!"

The other directors, plodding onto the roof, gathered around the man.

"The moon too!" he exclaimed. "The sun went first, then the moon—almost at the same time!"

Apprentice voices commingled incoherently and T. J. turned from the confusion. More accustomed to the darkness now, he noticed the stars weakly in the uncanny night.

Saunders caught his arm and spun him around.

"It's awakening!" the mathematician shouted in his face. "It's ending its dream of existence!"

"We did it!" Langley groaned. "I told you there could never be any contact without disturbing it!"

"It's going to destroy every-

thing!" another director despairing.

"It's Brent!" Saunders went on. "That's what's wrong. He started getting some kind of reaction and he bolted. Wherever he is, he must have become aware of the thing."

"The more he learns," Crossett added, "the more it's going to stir!"

"And we don't even know where he is!" complained Langley.

T. J. held up his arms to quiet them. "Maybe—"

But Langley grasped his shoulders roughly. "The rest will go too—the planets—the stars—Earth!"

Caldwell, staring into the sky, shouted incongruous syllables. Finally he brought his voice under control. "*Venus is gone!*" His arm shook as he pointed.

Awed silence gripped the directors.

T. J. was aware now of the stirring city all around them. As darkness had fallen he had not noticed the single, sustained outburst of piercing, shattering noise—the crumpling of a thousand fenders, the instantaneous vocal outburst, of fear and astonishment, the shrieking of brakes and the blatancy of horns, the impact of metal against brick.

Then silence had come—a silence of bewilderment and terror.

And now T. J. listened to the noises returning to the city—uncanny sounds. A distant, hollow undertone of anguish against a background of wonder. An occasional voice rising above the in-

determinate, subdued hubbub.

There was a visual recovery too as street lights came on—dimly in the thinly populated warehouse district around the Foundation; more brightly to the north in the business section.

Saunders sounded a cough that was ruffled with both irony and near hysteria. "At least, there won't be a war, will there T. J.? Not even if our chain reaction ban fails."

"There won't be *anything!*" Crossett said numbly.

Stupefied, T. J. backed away, staring into the heavens—steady and brilliant now that his eyes had adjusted completely. There was Jupiter and Ursa Minor and Polaris and the Red Planet . . .

Mars disappeared.

Swallowing down the dryness in his throat, the Chief Director pointed. But Langley's wild outburst drowned his faltering words.

"Look! The stars!" The physicist pointed to a section of the eastern sky, ablaze with the stellar haze of the Milky Way. In its centre a small circle of intense blackness was like a plug pulled out of the universe.

Even as T. J. looked, another star blinked out on the fringe of the plug.

Crossett clamped his hand around the Chief Director's wrist and shook a stiff finger in his face. But before the chemist could bring the splutter in his voice under control, Langley caught T. J.'s arm.

"Well, damn it, let's do some-

thing!" the physicist demanded. "It's loose! It's going to destroy the universe!"

Crossett whirled around. "It'll happen just like we predicted! Earth will go last—a lonely, black planet in a measureless, lightless void!"

"Maybe we can stop it," T. J. said unconvincingly. "Maybe we can bring the sun back."

Crossett and Langley herded him toward the stairs.

FIFTEEN minutes later, T. J. shook his head morosely and rose from the conference table.

The others looked up despairingly, saying nothing.

"It's no use," he apologised. "It must be conscious now. It's ignoring us."

"Why shouldn't it?" Saunders asked bitterly. "How insignificant we must seem—against an entire universe!"

T. J. went to the window and shielded his eyes with his hands to stare into the heavens. The circle of nothing was like a void within a void.

"Still no results," the voice of the observer bounced glumly down the stairway.

"At least no more stars seem to be disappearing," the Chief Director said, returning to the table.

He stared awkwardly at the others for a long while. "I'm afraid it's here, gentlemen—Situation Z. I'm afraid I was wrong. There is no safe way to contact it and use its powers, consciously or subconsciously."

Even with his blanket acknowledgement, he saw, they were too stunned for further accusation. He was grateful for that. Otherwise they might think of blaming Brent again. And T. J. wasn't quite so sure now of his convictions over Brent's harmlessness.

"Situation Z," Crossett, the chemist, repeated profoundly. "That means we've got to contact Brent . . . and tell him all!"

T. J. nodded. "We've got to find Tarl and use him as an intermediate to appeal directly to *It*. Apparently we can't get through directly any longer—we've disturbed it too much for that!"

"Thank God we haven't completely upset his subjective relationship with it!" exclaimed Crossett.

But Langley was aghast. "Out-right conscious contact may only disturb it more! That might bring about total destruction sooner!"

Saunders stood beside T. J. "It's a chance we'll have to take," the mathematician said. "What difference does it make? Without a sun, the Earth is as good as destroyed."

"It may be sympathetic," T. J. suggested hopefully. "When we appeal to its conscious, it may listen condescendingly."

Saunders dropped into his chair and laughed sarcastically. "Would a megalomaniac listen to a—a microbe?" He slapped his hands against his knees. "But what else can we do?—Let's get Brent here."

"If we can find him," Crossett

reminded.

"Find him!" the mathematician repeated. "Good God, we've got to! We'll send out everybody! That research staff isn't doing any good now. Get them out."

"I've already sent them," T. J. disclosed.

The rooftop observer charged down the stairs. "Jupiter just vanished!"

On the roof once more, Edman drew the astronomer aside. "We must have been wrong!" he whispered distraughtly. "There *must* be an absolute association between Brent and that thing!"

"Nonsense," Caldwell protested confidently. "There's some other explanation. I don't think the thing is stirring. I think everything that's happening can be explained logically."

But Edman was not reassured. "Maybe we ought to tell T. J. he was going back to the lodge so they can bring him back . . . I'm afraid."

The astronomer seized the elderly man's arm in a brutal grip. "Don't interfere!" he warned. "Don't panic like the others. As long as we keep calm until we find out the facts, we're at an advantage."

CHAPTER FIVE

CHARLES poured another drink at the liquor cabinet; gulped it down, and strode across the room to stand staring out the window into the midnight sky.

Abruptly, he whirled around. "That won't help any!"

Marcella straightened on the sofa and her sobs subsided.

Relenting for his gruffness, he stood behind her and dropped his hands contritely on her shoulders. "Sorry."

"Why can't I be with him?" she asked distressfully. "If he knew what's happening, he'd want to be with me."

"It might not be all that bad," the chauffeur consoled. "The Foundation says things have quieted. No more celestial disappearances."

She rose and paced with her arms folded tightly against her body, as though she were cold. "He must have become aware of *It*, somehow. He must have gotten some indication—a break-through, a thought contact. Then maybe he got frightened and ran."

"And his fright," Charles continued along his line of reasoning, "may have started *It* too, since the fear concerned it personally. There may have even been a struggle of some sort."

"And he lost and it broke free!" She dropped limply into the chair by the window.

Charles slapped his fist into his palm. "But they've got to find him! We've got to get him back to headquarters. There's no telling when hell will start popping again."

Marcella nodded. "If only they had left things as they were! But no—T. J. had to dream up his planned Utopia! And everything

was going to be so nice! I'd almost talked Tarl into giving up the business. We were going to see the world." She laughed rapidly. "Two months to rest up at the lodge first. Then—"

She stared agape at the chauffeur, then turned and raced down the hall to the study. She pulled open a drawer in the desk and looked up smiling as Charles drew to a stop in the doorway.

"His keys are gone!" she exclaimed. "That means he's at the lodge!"

Charles dived for the phone. He dialled frantically.

"Give me T. J. We know about Brent!"

The Chief Director's trenchant voice came over the wire after a moment. "You found him?"

"He's at his lodge upstairs." "Go get him. Follow the original Situation Z plan—just to be on the safe side."

"We're on our way."

"Wait! How long will it take?" "Narrow roads, gravel, sharp turns, confusion in the city—about five hours there, five back. Best we can do."

"For God's sake man! We're responsible for a whole world! You've got to make it faster than that!"

T. J. stood motionlessly by the east window, hands in his pockets. He glanced distressfully at the wall clock, then turned back to the horizon. By this time on a normal day, the blackness would be streaked and mottled with the first vague tints

of dawn. But now the darkness beyond the low banks of clouds was mockingly relentless.

He leaned forward on the sill and glanced below. It was quiet now. It would be that way over most of the country. The people hadn't fully realised; hadn't been told anything definite. For the most part, it was just another night. The impact wouldn't coalesce until day came and the darkness persisted and the nighttime constellations wheeled inexorably back into the sky to ring down the curtain on the final hope.

But it must have been hell, T. J. speculated, around the other side of the world—in Asia when a morning sun vanished; in Africa and Europe where daylight had failed to appear on schedule . . . Oh, there'd be no more wars all right. But, in the cold, black, eternal night, man and his civilisation would be swept aside too.

The Chief Director turned sullenly to face the others. Half of them were bent forward on the tables, heads resting on limp arms. Others stared vacantly ahead. Only Caldwell was active.

The astronomer's pen scratched noisily across a page in his notebook. He tore out the sheet, wadded it and tossed it on the floor. He stared up at T.J., his face rigid with intent; then bent low over the notebook again.

Abruptly he slapped his pen down on the table and leaped up, kicking his chair over.

The others snapped erect.

A smile of triumph flared on

Caldwell's face. "The thing's not stirring! *It's not breaking loose!*" he shouted. "It's not Tarl's fault! We did it! We caused all this!"

The directors stared skeptically at one another while Caldwell cast a glance at Edman.

Then the astronomer flipped back several pages in his notebook. "Let's suppose that for some reason the sun did disappear. Almost as soon as we saw it vanish, the moon would necessarily be blotted out too, within about three seconds. Don't you see? It takes about that much time for reflected sunlight to get to the moon and back to us!"

He leaned forward on the table. "We saw the sun vanish and the moon go out almost at the same time. We lost our heads. We thought they were both destroyed. We got frantic when Mars went a few minutes later . . . But, don't you see that without sunlight to reflect Mars *would have* become invisible a little over four minutes after the moon? And Jupiter's last glimmer of reflected light would have reached us something like thirty minutes later."

There was a deep silence of profound comprehension.

The astronomer tossed the notebook on the table. "There are the figures—the approximate current distances of those planets from Earth as well as I can remember. Each of those figures, divided by the velocity of light, roughly checks with the timetable of disappearances . . . So, we were not witnessing dis-

integration by *it*, but rather an orderly process that can be completely explained on the basis of one primary cause."

"And that cause—?" T. J. asked eagerly.

The astronomer stood with his hands on his hips. "Not a sun that ceased to exist but one that *quit giving off light*."

The Chief Director started, then shook his head dubiously. "You've left one relevant factor unaccounted for . . . We saw *stars* being destroyed too."

Caldwell reached across the table and turned a page in the notebook. "Not being destroyed, T. J. But being *eclipsed* by a moon that we were unaware of because it had quit reflecting light!"

T. J. gaped in total understanding.

"Now for the sun," the astronomer went on. "Why did it suddenly go out?—You'll remember we had completed an emergency project some few minutes earlier . . . the prohibition of chain reaction. Of course, we qualified it by specifying that the propagation of light would continue—the *natural* propagation of light. But production of light on a sun incapable of sustaining the thermonuclear hydrogen-helium cycle would be *unnatural*!"

Crossett was on his feet. "You mean we blacked out the sun?"

"We didn't specify," Caldwell said calmly, "that the prohibition would apply only to Earth, did we?"

T. J. sat down stupefied. "Then it wasn't Brent's fault at all!" Edman the physician mumbled.

"Of course not," T. J. confirmed. "I knew that much all along."

Caldwell gathered up his notebook and put it in his pocket. "We tried, but we couldn't rectify what we had done . . . Why? Because we were trying to make the sun *rematerialise* when it hadn't *dematerialised* at all."

There was a general sigh of relief and several of the directors rose, stretched.

"Now that we know the trouble," Saunders suggested, "it shouldn't be difficult for us to correct it."

"Simply a matter of making the right appeal to *it*," Crossett returned confidently.

"And modifying the chain reaction prohibition to apply only to Earth," T. J. added. He glanced at the clock. "It's almost five now. We've still got time—"

Langley sprang up, his face awry with horror. "Good God! Charles and Marcella! They're contacting Brent!"

Several of the directors stared at him confused.

"We've got to stop them! The emergency doesn't exist any longer. If Brent becomes aware of the Foundation now—if he becomes aware of that thing, it might touch off another Situation Z!"

T. J. scowled. "I've already told you it doesn't matter if Tarl knows—"

"The hell with that!" Langley

broke it. "I've had enough of a scare. I don't want to take any more chances."

"Play it safe," Crossett urged. "Let's go back to our original premise that Brent's relationship is fundamental. Then we can't go wrong."

"But—" T. J. began.

"We don't want to hear it!" another of the directors protested adamantly. "This time we're going to vote you down . . . Brent *must not know!*"

T. J. slumped acquiescently as he saw the majority nodding curtly. But he sat erect again. "We can't stop them! They may even be at the lodge by now!"

"The hell we can't!" Langley argued. "We've got to!"

Crossett rose, his face grim. "As I see it, our problem is to break the contact between them and him without giving him any more information than he has . . . I think I see a way."

All eyes turned hopefully on him.

"We have this to consider," he went on. "The chauffeur and the wife's usefulness as immediates is over, since they may have already tipped their hand."

Langley nodded thoughtfully.

"Additionally," Crossett continued, "they will have to be removed from contact with him, since they will already have aroused a suspicion that they won't be able to satisfy short of telling him all . . . So, we must contact the agent nearest them who is in radio communication with us—the nearest armed

agent."

The directors stiffened; stared critically at him.

"The agent," he explained, "will stop the car while it is still on the mountain road. He will kill Charles and Marcella and escape. That will not only prevent the two immediates from reaching here with Brent; but it will also leave Brent without a source of additional information."

NIGHT air, cold and biting, streamed in through the car window and Charles, still in shirt sleeves, shivered. But he left the window open because the wind was refreshing and stimulating against his face.

He steered the large car around the last climbing curve and leaned forward to look at the luminous clock dial on the dash board.

"What time is it?" Marcella asked without lifting her head from the back of the seat.

"Five to six."

"The sun should be up now," she offered listlessly.

He nodded.

Outside, the stars were silent and cold and steady and the black night was laced among them like a sieve of infinity. He felt suddenly resentful toward the starlight—because it might be the only light that would ever come down out of the heavens again.

The lodge's driveway loomed abruptly and he braked the car on loose gravel.

"What are we going to tell

him?" she asked.

Charles realised that during the entire time he had been driving, he hadn't thought of how he would approach Tari; what he would say. Unconsciously, he had left it to Marcella. So that now they were here unprepared. And the most vital action of all time—in the whole universe—would have to come off unrehearsed, with whatever improvisations they could manage.

He turned onto the shell drive and the car's lights flashed across the white-washed trunks of trees, the long, low house, the cream-coloured sports car.

"Thank God, he's here!" Marcella said fervently.

But suddenly there was an eruption of intense, blinding light all around them. Charles squinted painfully, kicked at the brake pedal. Tyres skidded across gravel and the limousine lurched to a stop.

"The sun's back!" Marcella cried.

Charles slotted his eyes against the glare and threw the shift into reverse. The car shot backward, skewed around on the road, and lunged into the direction from which it had come. He pulled up with a clump of trees between them and the lodge.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, puzzled.

"We've got to figure out what this means! We may not be in Situation Z any longer. It might be dangerous if we contact him now!"

"But isn't everything all right?"

He stared at the fiery white sun, low on the horizon. "I don't know. I don't know what happened. We'd better get to a phone and talk with T. J. before we do anything."

SCREAMING brakes—tyres skidding on gravel—brilliant sunlight slanting into the trophy room . . .

Tari was awake instantly. He sprang off the sofa and went to the window. He saw the limousine sitting on the drive. And he saw Charles and Marcella, stark surprise on their faces as they stared at the lodge, at the sports car parked in front.

He watched the chauffeur shift hastily into reverse and back out lest they be discovered. The limousine straightened on the road and drove off.

Tari dropped his head in anguish . . . It was hallucination—Charles and Marcella coming to the lodge alone . . .

He sat heavily on the steps; lighted a cigarette; took one draught, and let it drop from his lips.

The trees, the road, the house, the sun—all were shimmering as though they were but part of a sparkling, luminous picture . . . Power, the infinite power of a universe concentrated all around him; smouldering; waiting; filling him with an electrifying anticipation of malignant eruption.

The eastern wing of the lodge disappeared.

Let it go.

It reappeared.

The sports car vanished and rematerialised.

... And there! A face peering at him from the shadows of the underbrush! The persecution complex was back too!

Why shouldn't he quit fighting them; stop trying to hold back the deluge? Why shouldn't he yield and let them engulf him in one merciful wave of numbing insanity?

He relaxed the mental shield of resistance.

And promptly came another delusion—false memory. The memory of a phrase. One that was not his own; that he had never heard before . . . *point-universe*.

What did it mean? Like a thousand echoes in the endless cavern, it reverberated in his head. He huddled in awe before the impression.

Another false memory—the vague concept of a vast, universal intellect. All was one and one was all. Each unit of matter was macroscopically great in its own, microscopically small universe—in its *point-universe*. While at the same time the largest galaxy, even the entire length and breadth and depth of creation, was infinitely small and insignificant in the unbounded dimensions of each smallest imaginable particle of reality . . . The sizeless point was all-encompassing.

The concept carried its own conviction—a conviction that must have been borrowed from the universal intellect and understood *through* its potential of

total perception and comprehension. He pursued the abstraction.

There was no distance, no size, no space, except the size and space and distance of the imagination. Each object from the macroscopic to the microscopic co-existed spatially with each other, their size being no distinguishing factor. The electron—each electron—was one and the same as each individual, each star, the galaxy, the universe. And all was everywhere at the same time.

He, Tarl Brent, co-existed with everything.

As though staring into a thousand mirrors in an amusement park's fun house, he saw himself reflected everywhere—in each tree, each leaf, each contour of the hills around him, each unit-feature of the lodge.

He gestured with a hand, and all the other Tarl Brents gestured simultaneously. He looked at the hand. The others looked too. The hand was Tarl Brent; each finger; each swirl in the surface of each fingertip.

The hand was other things too. It was a stone, a waterfall, the Eiffel tower, a child's laughter, a soft breeze at sunset, a modification of the Quantum Theory, a galaxy of stars.

Now he was the Brent that was a shell in the roadway, looking up at himself standing before the lodge. Now he was the Brent who was a marble column of the Parthenon, aware of the Grecian soldiers and citizens who lolled on

the steps of the temple listening to a white-robed orator. Again, he was a drop of water in the infinite ocean, surrounded by countless billions of other Brent-drops.

Suddenly he was the Tarl of a mountain road—a convoluted road blocked by a Ford parked length-wise across it, just around a curve. A man stood by the hood of the car—a man with a gun. On the other side of the curve sped the limousine with Marcella and Charles.

The road shifted and heaved violently, hurling the Ford and the man over the cliff. It settled back into normalcy just as the limousine rounded the bend.

Then Tarl lost his oneness with the road and all the universal visions that he had seen and understood at the same time. There were only the lodge and the sports car and the trees and the yellow-white morning sun. And he stood alone and lonely in the universal emptiness of his immediate surroundings.

He tried to recapture the omnipresent perception and comprehension. But it was gone.

Exhausted, he went back inside and cast himself spread-eagle across the bed.

CHAPTER SIX

T. J. burst into the fifth-floor conference room, grinning.

"We just got a call from Mrs. Brent and the chauffeur! They decided against making

contact with him when they saw the sun!"

"But I thought—" Langley began. "I thought the agent—"

"The agent didn't get to them, thank God."

Caldwell, who had been off to one side speaking with a staff member, went over to join the other directors.

"What happened to the agent?" Saunders asked.

"We'll find out when he reports in. In the meantime, let's relax for two or three hours. I'm sure we could all do with a shower and shave. Breakfast will be served in a half-hour. I'm having clean bed-clothes distributed in the dormitory for those who want to rest until the two immediates return. When they report in we'll decide whether to leave Brent up there alone or put him under surveillance again."

Langley shot up from his chair. "I'll be damned if we'll leave him alone!"

T. J. spread his hands pleadingly. "But if we surround him with watchers, he's liable to start getting suspicious."

"No, he won't," the physicist countered, "because we're going to watch him just enough to see that his actions are normal."

"Then—?"

"Then we're going to call off this whole damned thing. I don't want any part of Operation Utopia!" Langley studied the reactions of the others closely.

"It's too dangerous," Crossett said. "We ought to leave things alone."

"We were cautious before," added another director. "But now we're getting more reckless than we ever dreamed we would."

Saunders shook his head vigorously. "I've had enough."

T. J. raised his hand. "You're all just excited. We've had a rough time of it. Let's wait until after we've tested before we discuss it any further."

Reluctantly, the others rose and followed him from the room—all except the astronomer and Edman.

Caldwell moved into the chair next to the physician. "Shields just heard from Raleigh," he disclosed. "Apparently Brent is learning a lot about the thing—fast. From Raleigh's description, the area around the lodge is like a writhing mass of hallucinations."

"Is Brent going to be dangerous?"

"I imagine he will—pretty soon. But right now we'd better consider the Foundation . . . I don't think we'll be able to tolerate it any longer if T. J. succeeds in whipping the directors back into line."

"You mean we should try to—destroy it?" Edman asked.

"We'll have to. Even if they disband they'll soon realise somebody else is manipulating the entity's power. Then we'll have to fight them without the advantage of surprise . . . Anyway, their chain reaction prohibition has us blocked completely."

"Let's just overrule the prohibition."

"Impossible. It would be our will against theirs, in effect. They are stronger . . . Besides, T. J. doesn't realise that if he keeps fooling around with intrinsic order, with basic natural law, he'll disturb it to the point where it will start destroying the world! What happened this time was just a warning."

The physician rubbed his palm against the stubbles on his cheek. "You say we can't overrule their ban on nuclear disintegration because they outnumber us. Then, how are we going to fight them?"

"We're not. We couldn't. That would be the same as making it fight *itself*. Think of the inner conflict that would result! The thing would awaken completely. That would mean the end of everything."

"But—"

Caldwell wouldn't be interrupted. "We'll have to use surprise. One strike. And we'll hope that if anyone escapes they'll realise that to fight back would be asking for total annihilation."

"One strike," Edman repeated thoughtfully. "We'll just *think* them out of existence."

"Nothing as drastic as that," Caldwell objected. "That would be fooling with intrinsics again. That would be against the basic law of the conservation of matter . . . We'll settle for something more natural. The more unobtrusive we are, the smaller is our chance of disturbing its slumber."

Edman nodded understandingly.

Caldwell rose, straightening his coat. "Let's get out of here without being seen. First thing we have to do is get in contact with Raleigh and give him instructions."

"To kill Brent?"

The astronomer shrugged. "Why not? Soon he'll be as formidable as the whole Foundation. We might as well eliminate all our potential opposition as quickly as possible."

"Couldn't you kill him without using Raleigh?"

"Why take a chance on even lightly disturbing the thing when we have a man there and all we have to do is give him a signal?"

TARL woke famished in mid-afternoon. Staving off a deluge of speculation, he shaved and bathed. Then he fried eggs and bacon and ate ravenously while he forced his thoughts into trivial channels.

But as he leaned back from the empty plate, the torrent of concepts came. It was more than introspection. This time it was a cloudburst of memories . . .

Some of them his own—recollections that had lain obscure in unknown recesses of his mind.

Some belonging to persons he had never seen before but whom he knew intimately because he now had access to all their retentions.

Some of them vast memories of the great intellect.

They descended on him with overwhelming force, boiling up from below his subconscious.

In a single precursory evaluation, he knew he had never had any hallucinations; that everything he had imagined had been real.

Somehow, he had tapped into the reflective powers of the intellect. And using that hyper-rational reasoning, he knew also that what he was no experiencing was no superhallucination.

. . . There was a Foundation! A Foundation of scientists who, years ago, had welded the physical with the metaphysical and discovered their universe was not a concrete universe of matter, but rather a universe of thought fabric . . . It all was imaginary!

Nothing really existed. All was *thought*—the thought pattern of the one, great formless intellect. And that entity, existing in preuniversal nothingness—in a dimensionless void—had quelled its boundless loneliness by *imagining* a reality of a sort.

While in conscious control of its creation, the scientists theorised, the thing had imagined the existence of only a simple universe—perhaps a glade with a few animals and a handful of persons. And, for vicarious enjoyment of its dream world, it had associated itself with one of those persons.

The labour of creation had been exhausting. It fell into a lethargy, content over what it had called into existence. And while it basked in the warmth of that satisfaction—while it slept, the intellect extended its creation without conscious effort . . .

The glade became a valley; the valley a continent; the continent a world. Then came other worlds and stars and stellars systems. And its subconscious mind brought into existence, piece by piece, all the law and order and systematism that transformed its simple universe into an infinitely vast and complex cosmos.

Meanwhile, the handful of people grew and the intellect, having already decreed the order of birth and death and reproduction by immortal germ cell, remained undisturbed in its satisfied slumber. And it unconsciously descended the genetic ladder by associating itself with a new "host" in each generation . . . until now, it was associated with—Tar! Brent!

. . . That was what the scientists believed.

Dumbfounded over the revelations, Tar! rose and lighted a cigarette. He went into the trophy room and sat on the edge of the couch. And still the alien impressions and memories came.

The Foundation . . . it had been born after a certain T. J. Connor and some fellow scientist had discovered the true nature of the intellect's universe. Instruments T. J. had perfected on a physical-metaphysical principle had traced thought emanations not to the person suspected of being the originators, but to Tar! Brent.

Immediately, they were concerned over the startling realisation that the continued existence of the world hinged on the "host's" well-being. The

fate of the universe, they rationalised, depended on his remaining safe and unaware of the intellect's existence until the slumbering entity could unconsciously shift its association relationship to the next generation—to Tar! descendant.

Further, they were aghast at the possibility of Brent's dying or being killed prematurely. For then, left without a "host," the intellect would be aroused rudely from its slumber and wouldn't be able to hold together, through conscious effort, the vast, complex thought-universe which it was sustaining subconsciously.

SEARING pain flared in Tar! fingers and he shook the burning cigarette and its inch-long ash from his hand. Determined not to interrupt the flash-flood of concepts, he ignored the blistered skin. And his thoughts again focused on the group of scientists.

The Foundation had kept him under constant surveillance; had dedicated some of its millions in wealth to insure his physical safety, even his success in business. They wanted him to remain content so there would be no mental distress that might get through his subconscious and possibly disturb the intellect.

He started over the next thought . . . They had even brought *Marcella* into the Foundation! In effect, they had offered her to him to insure his happiness and thereby prevent the thing's awakening! She was one

of them—she and Charles and Maud, his secretary, and God only knew how many others!

They had not only protected him, but also tried to keep him unaware of the existence of the intellect. For they had thought that if he learned about it, the impulse of his comprehension would get through to the thing and cause it to awaken . . . and lose control of the universe it had built!

New impressions came—so vague, so impossible that he couldn't comprehend them. Memories of a past he hadn't known. Recollections of indistinct events that hadn't even occurred yet—*memories from the future!* So hazy and fleeting that he couldn't resolve them.

More remembrances came to the surface—faster now, as though seething in their desire to be recognised. And through them he became consciously acquainted with the other directors of the Foundation . . . with Langley, Saunders, Crossett and Caldwell and Edman . . .

He paused instinctively, tense before the impact of something unknown and ominous—something that concerned one of the directors. No, two—Edman and Caldwell.

They were directors, but they were working *against* the Foundation! They were even now planning destruction of all the others!

The fools! If they knew that much about the intellect, didn't they realise that the thing must

not be thrown in conflict with itself in *any way?*

Searching his pockets for the car keys, he lunged for the door. But the mental storm of surging concepts and alien revelations persisted despite his preoccupation with Caldwell and the Foundation.

Outside, his shoes crunched shells as he sprinted for the car.

A shot rang out and a slug splintered a weatherboard on the front of the lodge.

Another shot and another bullet pinged into a rear fender of the car.

Tar! dived for protection into the space between the convertible and the lodge.

A third slug splattered gravel close to where his face lay.

But even in his confused distress, impressions from the intellect's subconscious still came—pertinent impressions now . . . Caldwell wanted to kill him; one of Caldwell's group, a man named Raleigh, had followed him to the lodge!

And with the enlightening thoughts came selective universal perception. He could see Raleigh hidden behind the tree—as clearly as though he enjoyed the vantage point of the tree itself.

The man raised the revolver; aimed.

The tree trembled as though astir with a vital force. One of its branches lashed down across Raleigh's wrist and the gun was jarred from his hand to fall among the shells of the driveway.

Raleigh raced out to retrieve

the weapon. But the revolver disappeared.

Momentarily confused, the man stood there while Tarl rose. Then Raleigh charged, while a frantic desperation gripped his features.

The man disappeared.

There was a brief visual impression, as nebulous as an after-image, of a startled Raleigh suddenly finding himself standing beside a dirt road that might have been half-way across the continent. Then Tarl turned toward the car again.

But he stopped and called up for consideration other concepts of a point-universe, knowing now that there were ways of applying those concepts that he hadn't visualised before. There was the idea, for instance of his oneness with the universe . . . and how that oneness erased the concept of distances.

There wasn't much time though. He had to hurry—*hurry!*

T. J. rotated slowly around in the swivel chair and faced Marcella and Charles.

"You'll have to drive out to the lodge first thing in the morning. Get him back under surveillance until I can convince the others it'll be all right to go ahead with Operation Utopia."

Saunders, the mathematician, ran a hand dourly through his matted hair. "You haven't even convinced me yet T. J. I'm afraid your project is over, much as I would like to see it succeed."

Outside, in the first-floor

corridor, a shimmering haze swirled next to the door of the Chief Director's office. It coalesced, steadied and became Tarl Brent—Brent and a section of the lodge's couch.

He looked down indecisively at the half-piece of furniture and it disappeared. Then he opened the door and walked in.

T. J. facing in his direction, gasped and lurched up; backed away in astonishment.

The others whirled around.

"Good God!" shouted Saunders. "It's Brent!"

Charles rose gawking.

Marcella sat stiff in her chair, not breathing, staring in bewilderment.

Tarl stood frozen in the doorway for a moment. Then:

"You—you know about us?"

T. J. stammered. "About the Foundation?" His eyes roved horrified about the room, as though he expected the walls to close in on him.

Saunders, the chaffeur, Marcella—all were motionless.

"Get out! Quick—get out!"

Tarl wondered how he could convince them—how he could explain everything in the seconds that were left.

"There's not time!" he grasped Marcella's arm and prodded her toward the door, "Get out—quick! It's going to attack!"

Charles and the mathematician bolted for the door.

"Do what he says!" the chaffeur shouted over his shoulder.

T. J. shook off his stupefaction and stumbled across the room.

But he drew back suddenly "I've got to warn the others!"

"No time!" Tarl pushed Marcella into the hall. Then they were racing for the exit behind Charles and the lagging Saunders.

"Get out of the building!" the Chief Director's voice thundered over the loud speakers. "Everybody out! Situation Z!"

Tarl led the others in a dash across the street and down the sidewalk. A lone truck rolled by, its driver staring puzzledly at the scene of action in the otherwise quiet warehouse district.

Charles drew up alongside Tarl and caught his arm. "What's going to happen?"

But Tarl turned as he ran to stare back at the Foundation. T. J. lumbered from the entrance; paused to scan the street; saw the other four, and followed. Scurrying figures appeared on the fire escapes.

Then, with the brilliance of a hundred suns, intense, fiery light enveloped the building. Dazzling flames made the afternoon seem like dusk and, along with the sun, cast twin shadows of Tarl and the others.

Marcella screamed and Tarl pulled up, blinded and cowering from the heat.

T. J. caught up with them and shielded his eyes to watch the uncanny fire spread to other buildings. His face was paralysed with fear and despair.

"Where's the car?" Tarl snapped.

"Around the corner." Charles pointed dazedly.

AFTER they had turned onto the side street, T. J. caught Tarl's wrist.

"Brent, you—you knew about us, about the Foundation?"

Tarl nodded absently. "Everything—from the formation of the Foundation, through its disbanding and reactivation . . . the tsetse fly, the chain reaction prohibition—all."

Saunders brushed the Chief Director aside and ran to stay abreast. "And now, because you know, it's—it's breaking loose?" he asked frenziedly.

How Tarl wondered, could he begin to explain?

Marcella pressed close to his side. He put his arm around her and increased his pace as he saw the car a block ahead.

Trucks were converging on the neighbourhood and the clamour of a fire engine sounded in the distance.

Tarl turned his attention from the others and mentally groped for the universal perception he had experienced outside the lodge. The anxiety of the moment, however, was too distracting and he couldn't concentrate sufficiently to find Caldwell and Edman.

Marcella touched his hand. "I don't care what happens now, Tarl," she said. "I don't know how you found out about the Foundation, about me. But I'm glad you did. It's been awful keeping everything from you; working against you."

"It's all right," he reassured. "I understand."

They reached the car and

Charles started to get behind the wheel. But Tarl motioned him into the back with T. J. and the mathematician. Then he started up the engine and drove off toward the main thoroughfare.

Saunders leaned forward, poking his head between Tarl and Marcella. "But—but you *can't* be aware of *it*!" he said incredulously. "That would mean the end of everything!"

"My being aware doesn't make any difference, as T. J. pointed out before. You're a mathematician. You're familiar with the point-universe concept. You should have seen the truth before he did."

"But—" the mathematician spluttered. "But the indicator! We followed T. J. instrument and it showed that all thought emanated from you; that you were the centre of everything!"

Tarl laughed dryly. "Like T. J. explained—a subject paradox. The other end of the needle pointed anywhere, depending on relative directions. You couldn't know which end was right, since it was a measuring device subject to your own interpretive limitations. In effect, you followed your nose until I got in the way. Then you made the decision it was me. To satisfy the forced subjective relationship, it became me."

As though the sun had suddenly hidden behind a cloud, the overall intensity of light from the afternoon sky diminished . . . But there were no clouds in the sky.

Marcella trembled and Charles

swore.

"That's a basic effect!" T. J. shouted. "It's stirring!"

"Maybe it does make a difference!" Saunders moaned. "Maybe we're all wrong and it does make a difference that Brent knows!"

The light fluctuated feebly, then returned to a normal intensity.

Tarl tensed; tightened his grip on the steering wheel. The partial light failure—it was the first reaction by the thing to the disturbing confusion of being forced into conflict with itself.

Would Caldwell and Edman take warning from the manifestation? Or would they continue attacking until they eliminated all opposition?

The sombre bulks of warehouses thinned out as they drove along the street and were replaced by decrepit residences where confused tenants, still frightened over the previous day's miracle, stood on their stoops staring into the sky.

"How did you find out about us and the Foundation?" Saunders asked numbly.

"Your Operation Utopia set up a reactive effect from the thing's subconscious. Impulses—bits of its memory and hints at its identity—started getting through to me. Fragments of universal and individual memory. Most of it pertaining to me . . . I even remembered that being followed a year ago wasn't an hallucination. And I saw how you threw Marcella into the picture, then

decided to call off the watchdogs because I was getting suspicious."

CHAPTER SEVEN

TARL stopped the limousine at the main throughfare, laden with its streams of cars headed toward the suburbs. But the cars were motionless and their passengers were standing perplexed around them, staring into the sky. They, too, had witnessed the universal faltering of light only minutes earlier.

He turned onto one of the less crowded inbound lanes and headed toward the business district, steering the big car gingerly around the stalled vehicles.

Marcella looked up into his face. "You said they threw me into the picture," she reminded awkwardly. "I was afraid that if you ever found out about the Foundation you'd think my only interest in you was as an immediate."

"I'd hoped it wasn't," he said soberly.

"It wasn't."

He smiled. "I know. I even had an insight through *it* into your motives." He put an arm firmly around her shoulder.

Saunders' face hovered close to Tarl's shoulder again. "If it's not stirring because you're aware of the thing—then what is arousing it?"

Tarl shook his head wistfully. There was so much that would have to be explained to refute all the misconceptions. And there

was no time because he had to recapture universal vision and monitor Caldwell's actions.

T. J.'s head reared beside Saunders' and the Chief Director stared into Tarl's face. "Why is it stirring?"

Tarl sighed in resignation. "It makes no difference whether our awareness of the thing gets through to it—whether we tamper with its universe by using its power . . . How insignificant we must seem! Like ants crawling over an elephant's hide!"

He swung the car around a trailer truck parked in the central inbound lane. "We'll have to look at basic point-universe concepts: We're insignificant, but at the same time we're ultimately significant. In a hypothetical dimensionless universe, each part is as great as the whole. And the whole is really as insignificant as the smallest part. So it makes no difference what any of the parts do . . . It isn't our harmless meddling that's awakening it. And it isn't my being aware . . . It's the fact that the intellect can put up with any inconvenience without being disturbed—except the inconvenience of being forced to turn against itself."

"But—" Charles blurted in his ear, exasperated. "Who's forcing it to turn against itself?"

"Two of the directors—Caldwell and Edman. And a few others from your staff. They're trying to force the world into a global war and dominate it. They decided they had to destroy the Foundation first and every mem-

ber in it—even me.”

There was only stunned silence in the rear seat.

“You see,” Tarl went on. “Caldwell, too, guessed right when he assumed that the relationship between the thing and me was only subjective. He’s so sure he’s right that he’s decided to go ahead and kill me along with all of you.”

“Is that why the Foundation was destroyed?” Saunders asked.

Tarl nodded.

T. J. frowned. “But that decrease in light intensity a while back—why would Caldwell—”

“Caldwell didn’t do that. That was a vicious reaction from the intellect.”

“A reaction to what?” Charles demanded.

“To disturbance. As I said, the thing can ignore anything that goes on in its universe, even conscious discovery and use of its supernatural power . . . anything except being forced into conflict with itself.”

SUDDENLY the road erupted in a violent soundless explosion behind them, hurling the rear of the limousine off the ground as though it were a toy automobile. Unimaginably fierce flames spouted from the crater—flames so intense that they were like liquid.

The car, projected viciously forward by the force of the eruption, crashed back down on its rear wheels. T. J. and Saunders managed to brace themselves, but Charles was thrown forward and

Tarl heard his head strike the sliding partition between the two seats.

Skidding, the limousine ploughed into the motionless car ahead.

“Caldwell’s attacking again!” Tarl warned.

He turned to Marcella. Her face was bloody from a gash in her forehead and she wavered in a near faint. But he caught her and helped her from the car, pressing his handkerchief against the laceration.

Saunders and T. J. struggled out the rear door, supporting the unconscious chauffeur between them.

The crater, Tarl saw as he glanced back, had expanded spreading out to encompass the entire roadway. And startled motorists retreated before the fierce flames while they watched the stalled streams of automobiles being consumed.

Another area of concrete heaved upward closer to the wrecked limousine, forcing Tarl and the others back. Frantically, he half-carried Marcella away from the new peril.

He heard T. J. and Saunders shouting desperately. Then they surged past him toward safety, their clothing smoking from the heat . . . They had left Charles back there!

Tarl turned to go back for the chauffeur. But the temperature was unbearable. For a brief moment he withstood the impossible heat, shielding his face with upraised arms while he watched

Charles’ clothing smoulder and burst into flame. It was a bitter moment—a meagre requiem for a man, Tarl thought, who had dedicated his life and talents to a cause . . . and had, at the same time, become his closest friend.

The new fire spread swiftly and he whirled to overtake the other.

“Sorry about Charles,” Saunders said, not sounding very sincere.

“There was nothing you could do,” Tarl returned numbly as they bucked the tide of curious converging on the fires.

“Where are we going?” Marcella asked.

“If we show Caldwell we’re not going to fight back,” Tarl explained, “he may stop the attack.”

T. J., puffing, struggled to keep up with them. “But how can Caldwell do all this?” he asked.

“Caldwell knows more about the thing than any of us. He’s been in contact with its memories, in control of its powers longer than I have.”

They turned a corner and headed down a shadowy street flanked by tall buildings with people scurrying along the sidewalks and between stalled automobiles.

“Why go on with his attack?” Saunders asked. “If he’s as familiar with the concepts as we are, then he knows we won’t resist, knows we’ll be afraid to fight back—afraid we might make it lash out and destroy everything.”

“He realises that if we escape we might wait our chance for one swift, decisive stroke—like he tried against the Foundation.”

TRAFFIC started to move in the streets again—slowly, apprehensively. Crowds on the sidewalks began to filter back into the stores and offices.

Tarl slowed their pace and T. J. drew up beside him. “What do we do now?”

“I’m trying to find out what Caldwell will try next.”

“How?” the Chief Director asked, puzzled.

“Universal vision . . . Caldwell probably knows what it is better than I. It’s an ability to go through the thing’s perception and see anything, everything.”

Tarl walked with his eyes focused nowhere. “They’ve got a hotel suite a few blocks away . . . Caldwell, Edman . . . Eleven others . . . *Maud* is with them!” “One of the immediates!” Saunders exclaimed.

“Oh, Tarl!” Marcella begged. “You won’t fight them, will you?”

“I don’t know,” he said uncertainly. “I don’t know if I can.”

If he opposed Caldwell, the inner antagonism the thing would experience might arouse it completely and it would release its hold on the world—on the universe. If he didn’t, the astronomer would strike again. And, if Caldwell was successful, what kind of a world would it be—a madhouse of miracles and unlimited power warped to selfish purpose? War and eventual despotism, with the despot supernaturally protected?

“We’ve got to fight back,” Tarl decided grimly.

“No!” Saunders objected. “Wait!

He might realise what he's doing!"

Tarl shook his head. "He's taking a calculated risk. He's willing to chance world destruction — universal disintegration. He's gambling on winning at some point short of total annihilation; on being able to hull the thing back into its lethargy after that. Then, by using its powers he'll rebuild the world like he wants it."

There was an impelling concept burgeoning at the back of his mind—something he suspected might be vastly significant. But the thoughts lacked clarity and unity and he could not bring them into order.

He dulled his vision to the tall buildings around him, the traffic, the people who still stared misgivingly into the sky as though beginning to doubt that the light had actually dimmed.

Then his perception opened to a myriad visual panoramas, vague and distorted in their superimposition one upon the other. Out of the welter of scenes, he selected one for scrutiny—Caldwell and Edman and the others in their hotel suite.

The astronomer stood in the centre of the room, away from the others. He was stiffly erect, his hands clasped together and his eyes closed.

And, momentarily, Tarl had much the same sensation as someone peeping through a keyhole and finding that the person he was spying on was peeping back . . . Caldwell was tracking

their moves.

Abruptly a fierce rumbling sounded and Tarl snapped his attention from the room . . . The wall of the building ahead was crumbling, falling outward, pouring tons of mortar and bricks into the street.

Like a ripple in a curtain, the disintegration spread along the face of the building toward them, showering crushing destruction on slow moving automobiles, on horrified, screaming pedestrians trapped on the sidewalk.

Grasping Marcella's hand, he turned and raced back, lunged through the streams of automobiles.

"Caldwell?" Saunders gasped, running along beside him.

"He won't give up!" Tarl shouted.

Down the middle of the street they retreated, into the next block and its open square that offered safety from the crumbling devastation.

In the centre of the square, they turned to stare back. Like blocks tumbling inward, buildings on both sides of the street were collapsing to hurl their masses of bricks and mortar into the chasm below. The rumbling was a fierce thunder and the impacts shook the ground like an earthquake.

"Tarl!" Marcella shouted. "T. J.'s still back there!"

TARL scanned the panic-stricken crowd that pressed in around them. But there was no sign of the Chief Director. Saunders, standing on his

toes to stare over the heads of the mob, futilely searched the area. Then he boited to race back into the street.

But Tarl caught his arm. "It's no use. He couldn't have gotten out of that."

Abruptly the bright afternoon sky dimmed to an uncanny dull grey. A terrified hush fell over the crowd.

"It's the—thing, isn't it?" Saunders asked, fearfully hesitant.

Tarl nodded grimly. "A reaction from that last—"

Darkness more intense than the blackness of a starless night, descended. The apprehensive murmurs of the throng became a steady, shrill cry of panic and the press of bodies against one another in the unnatural night was at once a surging bedlam.

"Marcella!" Tarl groped for her hand. But his arm was caught and bent back and almost broken by the swell of humanity.

"Tarl!" Her voice came frantically to him in the dark. Then, more weakly from a greater distance, "Tarl . . ."

He pushed off blindly in her direction, fighting the grip of panic. God, he had to find her! She'd get killed in the mob!

"Brent! Brent!" Saunders' voice faded in the other direction.

He shouted their names louder, but his words were only lost in the pandemonium.

The sun was like an almost indiscernible phosphorescent disc—too dim to illustrate anything but its own surface, too weak to

cast a single beam of light on the blackened Earth. Then it, too, was snuffed out, leaving nothing but a complete darkness beside which the black of space would have seemed brilliant.

A forearm swung into Tarl's face, drawing blood from the corner of his mouth. Hands pushed desperately against his back, hurling him forward into swinging fists . . . In the hell of thrashing humanity he could only try to protect himself.

But Marcella was trapped in the panic-stricken horde! Shouting her name even more desperately, he surged forward, his own fists lashing out wildly.

Later—he couldn't know how much later it was that he fought down the frenzy—he huddled against a tree, trying to think rationally.

He took out his lighter and struck it. There was the smell of burning wick and flaming fuel as he held it close to his face. And there was the heat of its fire . . . not a glimmer of light, however, pierced the impossible blackness.

But there must be a way to see! Even in a universe without light, there must be some special kind of vision—for a supreme intellect!

He nursed the desperate suggestion . . . and suddenly there was light! It was an unnatural, personal hypervision in which the horrified, still-blind throng around him was outlined in a pale monochrome of chalk-white and intense shadow.

And abruptly, without having consciously willed it, he was looking in the hotel suite scene once more . . . There were Edman and Caldwell and Maud and the others, cringing in the impenetrable blackness, yet illuminated in the hyperlight.

The sightless stare in the astronomer's eyes; the way he held his hands up protectively in front of him; the fear that was vividly etched on his face—all indicated he had not discovered the alternate vision.

Now, Tarl realised, was the time to strike back—while Caldwell was at a disadvantage.

"Tarl!" It was Marcella's frantic voice again.

THEN he saw her. Even while he kept his attention riveted on the room, he spotted her cringing between a refuse disposal bin and a drinking fountain, partially protected from the crazed mob.

He pushed his way to her and she drew back at his touch, but clung desperately to him when he called her name.

Then he channeled his full attention to the room; called up a visual image of fire—the kind that Caldwell had used—erupting throughout the suite. But before he could turn the impression into a directive, a man from the back of the room suddenly groped forward.

"Dr. Caldwell?" he called urgently.

"What is it?" The astronomer twisted his head around sight-

lessly. "Can you see anything yet?"

Spurred on by the oral bearing, the man went forward faster, one arm thrust out in front of him. His hand touched the astronomer's chest.

"That you, Caldwell?"

"Yes. Can you see? Is there light?"

The man's other hand flashed into view with a knife. He swung it up and down using his left hand as a guide and jerking it away from Caldwell's chest at the last second.

Even as the astronomer collapsed, Tarl was aware of the fierce, malicious thoughts—descriptive orders, threats, curses that Caldwell hurled in bitter frustration at the intellect, antagonising it into full wakefulness.

The infinite length and depth and breadth of the heavens burst into a dazzling brilliance that was like the unlimited light of a universal sun.

And the mass in the square cringed before its intensity; cowered in sudden paralysed silence.

"Brent!"

The mathematician's shout was like a shot in a cathedral.

Tarl spotted him a hundred feet away, weaving through the dazed throng. He answered and Saunders came forward.

Slowly, the inchoate brilliance of the sky dispersed in shimmering motion to reform into a star-like clusters of light . . . It was like watching the birth of a universe. Only, Tarl realised, it was

actually the death of one. And there was nothing they could do about it.

Saunders reached them and grasped his arm. "Is this the—end?" he whispered hoarsely.

The mathematician's face was bloody and his clothes torn. There was a deep cut across his lip and another across his cheek where his broken glasses dangled.

Tarl grimaced, nodded. "The thing's almost fully awake now."

"I wonder if Caldwell knows he caused it?"

"Caldwell's dead." He took Marcella and the mathematician by the arm and led them to a relatively vacant part of the square, between two trampled flower beds. "But he knew he would be responsible for whatever happened. He ordered total wakefulness after he was stabbed by one of the others."

Marcella still clung to his arm. "Can't we do—something?"

"I don't know. Contacting it now might make it even more spiteful. At least, it might be trying to fall back into its slumber."

THE points of light overhead settled into a semblance of stars—scurrying dots of intense brilliance spangled in a void that was itself as bright as the sky of day.

An object appeared several thousand feet up, floating into view from behind one of the buildings. It was long and silver and in the shape of a slender oval. It hovered for a moment.

Then, vomiting a blast of dazzling fire behind it, it disappeared over the horizon. Other glistening ovoid shapes streaked into view from the west. One of them dropped low over the square.

"It's a—space ship!" Saunders exclaimed. Then he turned dismayed toward Tarl and Marcella. "But there aren't any such things!"

There was an insignia on its side above the row of portholes. The emblem was a planet encircled by a ring.

A stentorian roar like the bel-lowing of a thousand lions exploded to the east and Tarl whirled as Marcella screamed in terror.

Half of the city had disappeared. In its place was a dismal, fog-enveloped moor with tall, huge-leaved trees rearing up from the mire. A towering reptilian creature, with jaws like a crocodile and tiny forepaws thrashing the air in front of it, lumbered from the bog and dripped slime from its scaly hide.

It charged across the street, cracking asphalt with its chitinous paws and scattering automobiles before it as though they were a child's playthings. Hundreds panicked and fled in the square.

A detachment of Pratorian guards, their ranks dishevelled and only fear and bewilderment on their faces, straggled down a side street in the path of the primitive monster.

Metal helmets and breastplates glistening in the sunlight,

they fell into a double line of defence, pila and swords bared. But even before they could hurl the weapons, the beast was upon and past them, leaving a decimated detachment in its wake. Those who could reformed their ranks and retreated back up the street.

The creature stopped in the centre of the square, alertly scanning its surroundings with tiny eyes set deep in its small head.

Tarl fell back, pulling the stupefied Saunders and Marcella with him, until he reached the base of Soldiers' Monument—a bronze colossus of infantry troops frozen by the sculptor in their charge on a bunker. As they hid in the recesses of the metal base, the scaly creature turned and plodded back to its primeval marsh.

Inscrutable darkness came again and the blast of rockets sounded like a composite of all the thunder claps that had ever been heard since the beginning of time. The unbearable din in an even fiercer explosion of sound that shook the earth.

Dimly, light returned; grew stronger. Where skyscrapers had clustered to the south, there was now but a mound of flaming debris. Bits of the hull of a space ship were discernible in the rubble.

To the north-east, another section of the city had vanished and in its place were the rock-strewn sands of a desert and three pyramids. Only, the pyramids were

not time-worn. They were fresh and new, with smooth mortar covering their surfaces and with white-frosted Egyptians scurrying about their bases and glancing horrified into the sky.

Tarl stared up at a segment of a shimmering white band that stretched from horizon to horizon, reminding him of the ringed palmet insignia of the space ships. Beyond the initial ring was another, and another, and another—not different ones, but seemingly reflections of the first that trailed off into infinity. As though they were a composite picture projected against the vastness of the sky, the rings wavered, disappeared, reappeared and contracted into moons—moons that disintegrated, only to spread out around the Earth again to form new rings.

The mathematician pressed closer to him. "God! Brent, I didn't think it would be like this! I thought everything would just—fade out!"

Tarl's face was grim and Marcella, huddled at his feet with her eyes closed, wrapped her arms desperately around his leg. He lay a trembling hand on her shoulder.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE sky faded into night and unfamiliar stars shifted positions like myriad dancing fireflies. Planets, some recognisable, swam about crazily in the black of space, advancing

and retreating, whirling. Comets appeared and disappeared and criss-crossed the firmament with a thousand curving trails of glistening light.

A horrified silence had settled over those who remained in the square and only an occasional whimper rose from the darkness around the monument.

Saunders was mumbling inanely, as though reciting an incoherent litany. "What does it all mean?" he finally asked.

Ephemeral night brightened into dawn and a cluster of varicoloured suns rose in the east—gyrating, ever changing in size and number, in magnitude and complexity of motion.

"It has to do with the point-nature of the universe," Tarl said. "Distance is an illusion. Time is only another expression of distance. So time is only illusory too. All intervals of time actually exist simultaneously. Points in time are separate only in the imagination of the intellect. When the continuity of those thoughts is disrupted, the barriers between time intervals no longer exist . . . We're seeing snatches of the past and future, all mixed up in the present!"

Only fragments of the city stood around them now. Most of the buildings and streets and boulevards were gone. In their places stood Oriental temples and Islamic mosques, Medieval castles and palaces and futuristic edifices of brilliant metal that rose thousands of feet into the air.

Then suddenly an unexpected

tranquility spread over all and the anomalous structures faded from reality, leaving only the original city.

"Maybe it's falling back into its lethargy!" Saunders rasped hopefully.

But even as the mathematician spoke, Tarl watched the buildings, the trees, the streets become as unsubstantial as a film of cobwebs—waving, fading. For what seemed like an eternity, all remained balanced irresolutely between ethereality and reality. Then, slowly, solidity returned.

Tarl looked down at Marcella, motionless at his feet. She had fainted. He started to lift her.

But suddenly the primeval swamp reappeared east of the square. While to the north a vast, icy plain glistened under swirling purple vapors. And across the way a landscape of nude craters and shaggy chasm materialised in eerie milk-ink tones to replace the sweep of buildings and streets that had been there.

Close to one of the craters a silver needle of a ship rested on its tripod struts. Figures that might have been human in the confines of their space suits stood awe-stricken around their craft and stared paralysed into the airless sky.

Cyclonic winds rose and bent the trees of the square toward the lunar diorama. The fog of the marsh and the purple vapor of the frozen wasteland swirled frenziedly and broke off in streamers to converge on the cratered scene.

The relentless chaos that had erupted all around him was world-wide—Tarl saw that much in a brief glimpse through the universal perception of the intellect . . . The entire surface of the Earth was a vast confusion of commingled, superimposed scenes of a billion different places, a billion different times.

Cautiously, he extended the range of hyperperception and at once his sweep of vision took in all space, all time—each particle in the vast stretch of the universe, each instant in the boundless stream of time . . . And everywhere everywhen, it was the same—chaos, the simultaneous disintegration of a universe at all places in space, at all points in time. And when it was over, it would be as though nothing had ever existed.

He looked down at Marcella. She hadn't moved. Saunders was standing limp against the colossal leg of one of the bronze soldiers of the monument. His eyes were closed to shut out the horror and his lips trembled in what might have been a silent prayer.

A flight of ships appeared streaking above the surface in the moon scene; headed toward the adjacent city-square panorama. They broke through the vague barrier separating the two areas and their surfaces glowed and burst into flame under the friction of sudden air resistance. The ships skewed to the left and into the primeval swamp scene where they exploded and plunged

to the mired earth.

Then infinite blackness closed in over all once more.

"It's dark again—isn't it?" The mathematician's voice was a terrified whisper. "Can't we do—something?"

Brilliant light bathed the city around them again. And, at the same time, the very substance seemed to flow once more from everything. The handful of persons cowering in the square, the buildings, the trees—all became like whips, so unsubstantial that they were almost shadows.

The mathematician cried out hoarsely. But his voice was muffled, barely audible. Marcella's scream seemed an infinity away.

Oblivion came—a black nothingness in which Tarl was aware of no physical sensation; in which there was no such concept as time; in which he couldn't even be certain that there was thought.

But somehow the reality of the square, the broken city, the crazed people returned all around him.

HYSTERICAL screams reverberated from one of the side streets. A score of persons spilled into sight and scattered, seeking safety among the wreckage of automobiles and in the shrubbery surrounding the monument. Their screams subsided and in the silence came a strange new sound . . . the bleating of animals.

A flock of sheep wandered

timidly from an alley and out onto the square, pausing to graze on the trampled grass.

Behind them, a twenty-foot giant clad only in primitive fur loin-cloth strode into view. Tangled hair hung over his face, almost concealing the single eye in the centre of his forehead. The eye cast wildly about in astonishment as it surveyed the buildings.

Marcella drew in a sharp breath, but Tarl pulled her close to him and her screams remained frozen in her throat.

"Good God!" Saunders whispered.

The giant stumbled across the square and disappeared up another street, indifferent to the few remaining persons who fled before him in terror.

More space ships darted across the sky.

The light dimmed and stars appeared—wildly gyrating stars that flared into novae and swept the reaches of infinity before dying like embers among the crisscrossing streams of comets.

A young, pretty girl in an ancient dress materialised by the foundation in front of Soldiers' Monument. Seven other figures solidified along with her—diminutive men in gaudy, impossible costume with pointed hats and upturned shoes. Horrified, they all bolted across the lawn, giving flight before a pair of large-headed men who sat tensely upon drifting airborne sleds.

Saunders collapsed on the base of the monument.

"Animals from the past," he whimpered. "Ships and men from the future. Cyclops—dwarves . . ."

Hoofs clattered on concrete a headless horseman spurred his charge down a street on Tarl's right. Three jinn, larger even than the former giant and with bodies glistening under a film of sweat strode awkwardly from the entrance of a building and rose weightlessly into the air to soar off westward. A Gorgon with veils spilling from her beautiful, almost nude body parade past, her hair a writhing mass of slender snakes.

A Centaur's hoofs beat staccato rhythm on the ground in front of, the monument while its human torso swayed in time with the exotic tune that issued forth from the pipes it was playing. Dancing along with it were two fawns.

The grotesque scene relentlessly held Tarl's attention. . . It was like a carnival in Rio, Mardi Gras in New Orleans, a Chinese New Year's celebration—all in one.

"It's in the last stages!" Marcella despaired.

"But—myths!" Saunders exclaimed. "How can myths be real?"

"The difference between reality and myth," Tarl said, "is only one of degree in *its* universe. . . Everything is imaginary—you, I, giants, dwarves. In a upheaval like this, even the remotest possibility can become a certainty."

The square was filling with people again—from everywhere,

everywhere . . . men from the distant future on their weightless sleds, some drifting without sleds; Neanderthal hordes; swartthy savages; troops armed with unfamiliar weapons; Grecian and Roman warriors, Egyptian dancing girls—all terrified, all fleeing from one another.

A section of the city disappeared and was replaced by another primeval swamp. An area to the south shimmered dematerialised and became a surface scene from some unknown, impossible planet.

Marcella screamed, broke free from Tarl's grip and ran out into the horde. Saunders glanced horrified at the statue, then flung himself away from it.

Instantly, Tarl was aware of the metal figures behind him stirring into motion . . . The sculpture was alive!

He raced but after Marcella, glancing back to see the bronze soldiers raising their rifles, swinging the machine gun, pulling pins on their grenades. The machine gun chattered and slugs swept the fleeing crowd ahead of him.

Marcella! He had seen the bullets ripping into her back, cutting her down with scores of others! She was lying out there, half-hidden in a confusion of limp bodies.

He lunged forward, only vaguely aware that the armed attack had cleared the square and that the soldiers of the monument were pursuing the remnants down the streets of the city.

Reaching her, he freed her

from the other bodies . . . Her face was lifeless; her arm limp. He let his forehead drop against her cheek and he lay there almost as lifeless as she . . . It made no difference now whether the universe came to an end. It seemed only proper that it should.

SAUNDERS came up and pulled him to his feet.

"She's dead," Dully, he tried to make the mathematician feel his sorrow.

But Saunders' grim expression did not change. "Why?" he asked, apparently unconcerned over Marcella. "Why does everything keep fading out and coming back?"

Tarl glanced at the devastation around him and suddenly understood the other's lack of emotion over his personal loss.

"It's like T. J. said," he answered numbly. "It's in a conscious state now and it can't hold together the universe it created while subcon—"

He stopped in mid-sentence as a vast vista of realisation opened—principles he had almost stumbled on before but couldn't at the time grasp quite clearly enough for comprehension.

"We've been looking at it wrong!" he cried out, still listless as he took off his coat and spread it over Marcella's chest and arms. "It isn't that the thing is content to sleep and let its universe exist. It isn't that when it awakes it loses control; can't consciously hold it together . . ."

Saunders looked puzzledly at

him.

Tarl turned back to the mathematician. "The thing has been awakening and *trying to destroy its creation*. But it can't Saunders. It can't destroy its universe! It tries—it causes all this to happen," he flung his arm wide to encompass all of infinity, "until it tires of exhaustion and has to rest before it can try again. And, when it rests, the universe it created *reforms itself* into normalcy."

The mathematician stiffened incredulously. "But—"

"No telling how many forgotten times in the past," Tarl went on, "the thing woke from its slumber trying to destroy, to order out of existence everything it created. But it could never succeed. It won't succeed now!"

Saunders' mouth hung open speechlessly.

"This time," Tarl continued, "it's more spitefully determined to destroy everything—because we've been meddling, interfering with it, agitating it."

"You mean it *can't* think think everything out of existence?"

"Not permanently. That's why things keep returning to reality now, against the will of the intellect. Its universe has existed so long that it has become as *great a force as its creator*."

"Then it's going to lose this fight for destruction?"

"It'll lose. Things will return to normal. Of course, the conflict will leave scars." He pointed toward the buildings where the rocket had crashed, toward the

hundreds dead in the square.

Saunders' face twitched as he wrestled with the concepts.

"Look at it this way," Tarl said, more eagerly. "There are two kinds of reality: The materialism which we think is normal but is really only imaginary—the thought pattern of the intellect . . . And there's a first-order materialism—one in which matter is *really* matter with all the basic properties we've assigned to it . . . By continuing in its second-order existence for so long, the universe has achieved a first-order materialism that can't be subdued, not even by the intellect itself!"

He spoke with a conviction which he knew could have come only from deep below his subconscious—from the underlying conscious of the intellect itself.

The mathematician shook his head. "But that's so different from what T. J. and the Foundation believed all along!"

"They were wrong! It isn't that the intellect is independent of the universe. It's the other way around. The universe is—can be independent of the intellect!"

THE earth quaked and vicious lightning laced the sky and buildings collapsed all about them. Fireballs descended from the heaven and flared intensely, seemingly determined to preserve part of their mass until they could reach the surface. One of them struck miles to the south, sending out a deafening wave of concussion and blast of heat.

"It's true!" Tarl stared spite-

fully at the lightning and meteors. "Everything we've guessed is true! And there's more we can learn . . . It's vulnerable in some way. It's trying to keep us from finding out how!"

Alternate waves of intense blackness and unbearably brilliant light raced one another across the sky, as though someone were dragging a striped canvas along the sweep of infinity. A bolt of lightning streaked down and crashed into the metal base of Soldiers' Monument.

But the quaking of the earth subsided and the squal-line of lightning retreated.

"We can fight it!" Tarl exclaimed. "We can keep it from attacking!"

In all directions from them, incessant purple-white streaks flashed hatefully on the horizon. But none of the bolts came close. Buildings collapsed with rumbling force around the fringe of the business district. But those still standing around the square were undisturbed.

Impenetrable blackness came. But Tarl spread his arm determinedly and light returned—steady light.

He turned exuberantly toward Saunders. "We've found out what it didn't want us to know! In this world of imaginary, second-order materialism, *any individual is as powerful as the intellect!* It's no stronger than you or I!"

Saunders was dumbfounded.

Tarl slapped his fist into his palm. "If the Foundation had gone deeper into the theory of

point-universe they would have seen what we're just finding out! They would have known that the whole can't be any more powerful than the least theoretical part!"

"You mean we may be able to control it after all?"

"Why try to control it?"

"So we can use its second-order materialistic power for good. So we can bring everything back to order."

"We don't need the power. Man can work out his own destiny within the limits of normal materialism. He can eventually be as great, through legitimate achievements, as he could through the thing's supernatural power."

Saunders was adamant. "But if we're stuck with it. If it's always going to be around where it can awaken again and start tearing down the universe, we might as well bring it under control."

Tarl stared thoughtfully at the mathematician. "Suppose it doesn't have to be around? Suppose we can—banish it?"

"From its own universe?"

"From its own universe." Tarl nodded. "Then our world—all nature would be on a first-order materialistic basis. No intellect to act as an ethereal colloidal so we can perform miracles, perhaps . . . But no interference like this." He spread his arm again.

And lightning crackled more viciously than ever along the circle of the horizon. Blazing meteors streaked vehemently

down, converging on the square. But the lightning came no closer and all the meteors exploded in dazzling light while they were still miles high. And the ground trembled faintly under their feet, as though some power greater than an earthquake were restraining the subterranean forces.

After a moment, evidence of the determined effort drained from Tarl's face and he relaxed.

"HOW can we get rid of it?" Saunders asked skeptically.

"It's a point-universe, isn't it? The most minute part is as great as the whole. While the whole is nothing more than a single point in an infinity of points in hyper-And the intellect is associated with our point only by a bond of imagination."

The mathematician was reflectively silent.

"If we're as strong as it is," Tarl went on, "we can force a complete disassociation. We can apply the concept of hyperspace and imagine the thing co-existing with one of the other points!"

The other's face was animate with comprehension. "An infinitude of points," he mused aloud. "Banished to any one of the other points, it could never find its way back. The odds against that would be too great."

Tarl's stare fell humbly to the ground. In one awe-filled moment of realisation, he had watched the intellect shrink in his conception from something omnipotent, something that was

master of all infinity and all eternity . . . to a thing that was no greater than he. It was like watching a universe fall in upon itself, contracting into insignificance.

But could he banish it other than in theory? Could he actually expel it? And, if so, would he want to—with Marcella and Charles and all the others gone; with the familiar world a hopeless shambles; with . . .

Suddenly he looked up at Saunders. "We almost overlooked the main thing . . ."

The mathematician stared back expectantly.

"If the intellect is master of space and time and if we're strong enough to expel it, then we ought to be able to determine the time of banishment!"

"I—I don't understand," Saunders stammered.

"We'll exile it not now, but at a time before the upheaval started! And no one will even know that any of this happened!"

The mathematician's features contorted as he wrestled with the possibility.

Tarl turned his attention to the intellect and the concept of an infinitude of points in a super-infinitude of space.

But he started and looked back momentarily at the other. "There's something else we didn't consider—the possibility it might not object to leaving. For millions of years it may have wanted to shake free of its creation, but couldn't. Not without objective help from within!"

T. J. withdrew his eye from the microscope and dourly shook his head:

"It's no use," he said looking helplessly at Charles. "I thought I might find a way to get in contact with its subconscious without going through Brent."

He shrugged. "But I can't get any results. It's as though there weren't any intellect there at all."

Charles laughed. "Give it up, T. J. You've been trying for a month. Let's forget it. It's better to leave things as they are."

He looked at his watch. "Anyway, I've got to get back to the

house before eight. Wouldn't want him to think I've been knocking around all night. You see, with the Foundation disbanded, I've got to start thinking about the future. I might take him up on joining the firm."

Across town, Tarl rolled over in bed and stared across at Marcella, still asleep. He got up and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

Then he sat there anticipating her smile when he told her he was going to take two months away from the office . . . They'd be sailing within a week probably. ●

He had to stick by his leaders, for they were his one hope for the future; but his was a blind loyalty, and he saw the truth — too late . . .

THE UNDERGROUND

By GORDON DICKSON

THEY would fight on! Yes, the fight would not slacken. For the Leaders were not surrendering to the enemy — instead they were going underground; and the little captain thrilled to the news that he was to head their escort. The war had gone badly, *this* war had gone badly, but the conflict would never cease until right triumphed and the Leaders were once more victorious. The little captain had always known this; but this final proof of it swelled his heart with pride.

He was the little captain to them all; just as they were numbers and not names to him. Not even in the privacy of his own mind did he refer to the Leaders by names. To their faces they were — "Sir!" and if reference to one must be made while respectfully addressing another, it was — "Sir! The official Number Three, sir—" or "Sir! The honourable Number Five, sir—" For this was Headquarters Code. Only the Doctor, did the little captain refer to by title; and even then he uttered the word with a capi-

tal initial letter for the Doctor was not just any doctor, but the private doctor of Number One, himself.

And, just as he capitalised them, so they lower-cased him. He was the "little captain" to all the Leaders. So did great authority look down from lofty heights upon his insignificant rank. For he was not really small in a physical sense. A little short, yes. A little young, perhaps, even for a "little captain." But it was a question of rank, not size or age, in the final essential.

The little captain was undoubtedly brave, although he had only seen action once. That had been right after he was graduated from the State Military School for officers' sons. He had been sent forth into the front lines as a lieutenant; and there they had given him a platoon of men and told him to follow a route marked out on a map, taking careful note of everything he saw and then returning. He had started out with his men; but at the first hill some big guns of the enemy had opened up and when the dust had

cleared, there was no one left of the platoon, except the little captain. He was then still only a short distance from his own lines; but his orders had been to follow the route on the map; and so he went on, taking careful note of everything he saw until he reached the end of his route and came back to the lines once more.

When he got back to the lines, he learned that Number One, himself, the First Leader, had been inspecting this portion of the front. And this great man had seen, by remote control television, all that the little captain had done (though, of course, he was still only a lieutenant at this time); and he had given orders that the young man must approach him to be commended.

How the little captain's knees trembled as he went up to Division Headquarters! But Number One was very kind. He put the young man at his ease and praised him, which made the little captain faint with joy, but also forced him to protest that he had really done nothing worthy.

"But the order was to follow the map, Sir!" he had said. "It is our duty to follow orders, Sir!"

And Number One had laughed and asked him questions about duty and loyalty and combat, to which the little captain had replied quite truthfully that they were all great and glorious things, as everybody knew because they were told that in school. And Number One had drawn back after a while and looked at him oddly; and asked him if he would

want to join the Headquarters Guard, which had the special duty of protecting the Leaders, the Numbers One through Twelve, at all times. And the little captain, hardly knowing where he found the strength to respond—so great was the honour—had answered yes.

So it happened that he had joined the Headquarters Guard; and here fortune had continued to smile on him. For, though it was apparent to him at a glance that nearly all the men in it were much older and wiser and more experienced than he, he had been promoted to captain in charge of Number One's particular security. And he had from then on been closer than anyone—except the Doctor—to the life and actions of the twelve great men who were the Leaders of the People.

His devotion to them had never wavered. His trust in them had never faltered. He had listened to them; and found that he could not understand them; but for that very reason he had implicit faith in their omnipotence. They would lead and he should follow and everything would come out all right.

THEFORE, the little captain alone among the Leaders, their families with a few secretaries or close friends, and the soldiers of his escort, was neither disheartened nor dismayed as they travelled to the Underground. The war might be lost, but the fight would go on. Number One,



himself, had announced this in his last broadcast to the people. his black eye flashing, his powerful jaw out-thrust upon the television screen. So what did it matter if for a short time the enemy set their heel upon the people? Deliverance would come.

—And now, as he stood waiting by the tunnel entrance in the mountains—the tunnel entrance down which the Numbers One through Twelve and their wives, secretaries and friends, were disappearing, the feeling swelled within him that this was a great

moment, and he was almost not surprised when Number One, the Supreme Leader, approached him. "Captain" said Number One. "Sir!"

Number One took him by the elbow—the little captain's elbow small and frail in that large, capable hand; and drew him aside. The other hand passed something round and hard—like a grenade, only larger—to the little captain.

"The escort," said Number One, in a low voice, gesturing toward the Headquarters troop which had accompanied them under the little captain's command. "We can take no chances. You will dispose of them."

"But wait until all of us are safely in the tunnel."

"Yes sir!"

"This weapon should do the job," said Number One, pressing the round, hard thing into the little captain's hand. "If not, you have your gun. Do not attempt to join us until you have disposed of the escort. Is that clear? Now you pull the pin on this and then let it go. You understand?"

"Yes sir!" said the little captain. And he stood correctly at attention, holding the round thing hidden in his hand, waiting until all of the people in the Underground had disappeared down the tunnel and were safely out of danger.

After the last person had passed from sight and a few minutes had gone by, he turned to the escort.

"Aten—shun!" he ordered. "About face!"

—And, when they about faced,

he pulled the pin on the round hard thing that was like a grenade; and rolled it along the ground toward the line of men, stepping back into the mouth of the tunnel himself, to be out of the way of the explosion.

Then the world erupted. Much more violently than the little captain had ever expected it to do, the ground rose up and flung itself in his face. Rock rained upon him, battering him, and for a moment he thought he had been killed.

But after a while he managed to get to his feet. One of his arms was broken and he felt crushed and strange through the middle part of his body. But he drew his gun with his good hand and went out to make sure that his duty was fully discharged.

The grenade-thing had wrought havoc on the mountainside. Rubble and rock had been blown clear of a shallow depression in the undergranite of the mountain itself. The troop had disappeared completely except for a tattered thing which some freak chance had wedged between two boulders. The little captain, weak and dizzy, made his way to it and found it was barely recognisable as a man he had known and liked. He shuddered and closed his eyes.

But the thing was still alive. It looked up at him and spoke.

"You are a murderer," it said; and cursed him. The little captain felt his stomach turn over within him. But he said, very gently:

"It is for the cause,"—and shot it swiftly and cleanly through the head. Then he turned and headed back toward the tunnel.

ROCK crowded the entrance, which was broken down by the explosion; but after he had passed this, the little captain found the floor of the tunnel flat and easy to walk on. But dizziness kept overcoming him in waves; and he was forced to steady himself with one hand on the rocky wall, as he made his way down into the heart of the mountain.

It seemed to him that he walked for a long way in the dark, guiding himself by his hand along the wall. And then it occurred to him, finally, that something had gone badly wrong with him inside when the big grenade went off; and that he might not make it to Number One to report. He staggered a little from time to time and finally he fell.

For a while he lay where he had fallen for the rock floor of the tunnel had turned wonderfully soft and sleep was tempting him. But then he reminded himself that he had not made his report and that Number One would be waiting to hear if all had gone well. So he struggled to his feet and pushed on; and, gradually he moved into a dream world in which nothing was real but the rock beneath his fingers and a great tiredness within him and he moved through dark, milk-thick fog toward the inner end of the tunnel and the report he

must give to Number One . . .

And finally there came a time when there were voices around him. But he could not see the people to whom the voices belonged and he could not understand them.

"It was for the cause," he told them. And he heard the Doctor's voice, near at hand, but with a strange and distant ring to it. "I will take him."

—And then he remembered nothing for a long time.

When he awoke, he was in a narrow white bed in what looked like a hospital room. And the Doctor was standing over him.

"Where am I?" asked the little captain.

"Half a mile below the surface," answered the Doctor. "You're in the Underground." The little captain felt the prick of a needle in the arm. "Now sleep and regain your strength, my son."

The little captain closed his eyes obediently and sleep came swiftly, for he was still very weak.

After that, however, he began to mend. Day by day, as the calendar clock beside his bed measured time, the Doctor nursed him, his old bent-shouldered body, lame from a wound in a previous war, limping back and forth by the bed, his eyes deep and sad in his long face, under shaggy grey eyebrows. And the little captain questioned him ceaselessly about how the work of the Underground was going.

"Why are you so eager?" the

Doctor asked him one day.

"There must also be work that I can do here," said the little captain. "I am anxious to get out of bed and begin it."

But the Doctor only shook his head when the little captain pressed him for an answer as to how soon he would be able to get up and go about whatever duties could be found for him.

"I am sure I will now," the little captain said. "I feel quite strong."

"Wait a while longer," said the Doctor.

Often the little captain, watching the Doctor as he moved about the room, was taken with wonder at the effort and attention that the older man devoted to him.

"—But I do not need so much of your time," the little Captain protested one day. "Surely your duties must call you elsewhere. I am very grateful, but—"

"It is nothing," said the Doctor.

"I do not understand," the little captain told him, "why you go to so much trouble for me. In our fight for liberty, here in the Underground, I, as a person of lowest rank, can clearly be of no great importance."

The Doctor looked at him. "You would have died if I had not taken care of you," said the older man.

"True, but what of it?" said the little captain. "I was not important—"

"You reminded me of my sons," said the Doctor, turning away.

"Have you sons?" inquired the

little captain, sitting up in the bed. "Are they here?"

"They died," replied the Doctor, harshly. "They were killed on the western front near the beginning of the war."

"Ah," said the little captain. "Now I understand. You must be very proud. You have gone to all this trouble for me in memory of your hero sons."

But the Doctor did not answer. He turned and went out the door.

EVENTUALLY, the day came when even the Doctor was forced to admit that the little captain was fit for duty. He came to the room to get the little captain and together they went to the rooms of Number One.

It was the first time the little captain had been outside his sick-room; and the Underground surprised him. For it was not full of offices and arsenals as he had expected; but instead seemed to be split up into a number of apartments and rooms dug out of the rock and branching of a large central tunnel. It was down this tunnel that he went with the Doctor and at the very end of it, they came to the rooms of Number One.

The same butler that the little captain remembered from above ground, met them at the entrance and conducted them back through rich-furnished rooms to one where Number One awaited them, leaning back in a large overstuffed chair and picking at a tray of food beside him. His big frame was sprawled loosely in trousers

and shirt open at the neck. It was the first time the little captain had seen the Leader of his people not in uniform and it seemed somehow indecent that a person of no importance like himself should view the Supreme Commander in this state of undress.

It did not, however, seem to bother Number One, himself. He looked up at the Doctor; and he looked at the little captain, who came automatically to attention and saluted.

"Well," said Number One, looking at him, "so here you are with me once again."

"Yes sir!" replied the little captain, stiff at attention. "Thanks to the Doctor, sir!"

"Yes—" Number One glanced at the Doctor with a look the little captain could not interpret. "Well now, what are we going to do with you?"

This was clearly a rhetorical question. The little captain retained his stiff stance and said nothing. Number One sighed.

"Well, put him to work in the broadcast section, Doctor," he said. "He's your responsibility."

"He will be useful," said the Doctor. They exchanged glances once more and the Doctor took the little captain out.

The broadcast section was a large, long room filled with all sorts of radio equipment. Waiting for them as they came in was Number Five, who had been Minister of the Interior. He was a short, raw-boned man with stiff black hair springing up on a head too large for his body; and he

rubbed his hands with pleasure as the little captain was brought in.

"Well, young man," he said. "Well!"

"Number One turned him over to you," the Doctor informed him.

"I asked for him. Yes, I asked for him," chuckled Number Five. "Yes," he went on to the little captain, "we've got a use for you here, my boy."

"I am honoured, sir!" said the little captain, saluting. The ex-Minister of the Interior did not look pleased.

"No military showing off here, now," he said. "I don't believe in that. Take off your coat and get to work."

Winning internally, for he felt almost naked with it, the little captain took off his officer's jacket and hung it on a coat-rack. The Doctor turned and went out the door, giving him one unreadable glance as he went. Then the little captain had no more time to think, for Number Five had him, almost literally, by the ear; and was teaching him how the broadcast section worked.

There was an immense amount of magnificent equipment, all of it automatic, or as near automatic as such stuff could be made. By some process that Number Five explained, but that the little captain did not understand, they could broadcast from the Underground here and yet not be traced by enemy monitors while their power was on. However, it was not really necessary to understand as long as he could execute; and

a few hours later when Number Three came in to broadcast to the agricultural workers who had been his responsibility as Minister of Agriculture, the little captain pulled all the right switches and twisted the right dials and was very happy. For the work he was doing was helping to win the country back from the enemy.

THAT night the Doctor came and took the little captain with him to the main lounge where everyone in the Underground gathered for recreation. It was a room as big as a ball-room, containing chairs, tables, a swimming pool, a dance floor and a bar, behind which stood Ki, a young man who had formerly been Number One's private bartender but who here in the Underground served them all, even the little captain. Ki was the only one in the room that the little captain could consider being anywhere near his social equal, so, in spite of the Doctor's instructions to mingle with the others, he hung close to the bar and exchanged a remark from time to time with Ki.

These social evenings were really not to the little captain's taste. He preferred to read in his room. But since the Doctor had taken him there in the first place, the little captain made it a point to drop in every evening for a little while, before going off to his book, or back to the broadcast room to tinker with the equipment or listen to enemy broadcasts.

The little captain was the only one who listened regularly to enemy broadcasts—at least he was the only one who listened from the broadcast section. There undoubtedly were, he thought, other receiving sets in other parts of the Underground—or for all he knew, other broadcasting units. Indeed, he did not know what the others in the Underground did—which was quite right, of course, for their work would be top secret. Occasionally, passing down the central corridor, he would pass a door ajar and catch a glimpse of an apartment something like the rooms of Number One as far as furnishings went. But undoubtedly the real work-rooms were farther back.

After a good start, however, things did not go too well with the broadcast section. Very soon after he took up his duties there, Number Five began to ignore him, and if the little captain wanted to find him for anything, he would have to look him up in the lounge, where the ex-Minister of the Interior would be hanging on the bar, and occupied in slow, steady drinking that ended with him eventually falling off his stool and being helped to his apartment by Ki.

It could not escape the notice of the little captain that Number Five was slowly disintegrating; any more that it could escape him that the day of their emergence from the Underground and the defeat of the enemy seemed as far away as ever. Part of the little captain's duty was to moni-

tor enemy broadcasts and digest the news in them for delivery to Number One. As a result he was forced to write down that all the Leaders had been tried in absentia by the Enemy and condemned to death for war crimes and that a new, false government, supposedly of the people, had been set up in their place. But whether Number One ever actually read these news accounts the little captain never knew. Number One kept exclusively to his rooms and the daily digest was taken from the little captain's hands by the butler at the door.

But Number Five continued to go down. The day came when he collapsed at the bar early in the day and the Doctor was called to his apartment after Ki had helped him back to his bed.

"He won't live," said Ki, to the little captain, when he returned to the lounge.

"But who will take his place?" asked the little captain. And Ki looked at him and laughed.

Possibly Ki knew that the little captain had taken over all of Number five's work a long time before. And possibly others knew it too. For no one was appointed as new overseer to the little captain. Indeed, when he stopped to look around at the others, he could imagine none of them taking over the job. Possibly their own duties kept them occupied; but to the little captain's eyes they seemed to be always in the lounge, or otherwise occupied only in amusing themselves. Moreover, most of them drank too

much; and were letting themselves go to pieces physically. How would they be in fit shape to assume their duties when they came back into the open again for all out battle with the enemy? Possibly this was all none of his business; but the fact that almost no one nowadays came to the broadcast section to speak to the people certainly was. The little captain had been forced to fill in his hours on the air with recordings of old speeches.

The little captain had been taught to obey without questioning. But the time came when he felt himself forced to ask the Doctor what he should do.

THE Doctor looked across the dispensary desk at him. The old medical man had aged yet further and grown freder looking in the months they had been Underground. He, together with Ki and the little captain, and possibly the servants in Number One's apartment were the only ones that seemed to have anything to do nowadays. And the Doctor seemed to be having too much. Everybody made demands upon his attention for some bodily disturbance or other. There were some, indeed, who seemed to make a hobby of being sick. And, in addition, the Doctor was liable to call by Number One at any time. And these summons came frequently and at any hour.

"What shall you do?" repeated the Doctor, after the little captain had asked him. "Why, nothing."

ing."

"Nothing?" echoed the little captain, wistfully.

"What can you do?" asked the Doctor, with a shrug.

"But the people—" in his agitation the little captain pointed straight up at the half mile of rock over their heads, as if the people were directly on top of them, "—they are counting on us. I mean they're counting on the Leader. If they hear nothing but the same old speeches how is the Resistance to stay alive?"

The Doctor looked down at the desk; he sighed.

"I did wrong," he said, finally, half to himself.

"Sir?" said the little captain puzzled.

"I should have left you to die," said the Doctor. He raised his eyes to the little captain.

The little captain stared at him, not understanding. The Doctor leaned forward and his eyes were gentle.

"Try and take more advantage of your leisure hours here," he said. "Try and be less impatient. Do each day's work as it comes and make it a practice not to think beyond it. Will you try to do that? For me?"

"Whatever you say, sir," replied the little captain. "But—" A buzzer on the wall sounded, summoning the Doctor to the apartment of Number One; and cutting the little captain short.

"We must each live as we can," said the Doctor; and went out.

CONSCIENTIOUSLY, the little captain tried to live up to the Doctor's advice. He closed his eyes to the drinking and the verbal fights that were becoming every day more common among the Leaders and the people they had brought with them. And he fed more and more old tapes into his daily broadcast until finally it was nearly all a rehash of something that had been done before.

One man, and one man only, still came occasionally to speak to the people. And he was Number Ten, the former Minister of Ports and Customs; and a big, violent man who liked to mention his own name in the broadcasts and was fond of emphasizing his past services to the country. Lately, however, he had been becoming more and more wild, not only when speaking behind the microphone, but among the others in the lounge. And there came a night when he ranted and raved before them all and finally went so far as to strike Number Two, with whom he was arguing.

Number Two was a wiry old man and he tumbled backward as if he had no bones at all; but when he hit the floor, instead of lying still, he rolled over on one side and a little gun appeared in his hand. There was a sound like a stick breaking and the big Number Ten fell all at once, pulling at his chest with both hands. And lay still.

—And all the people in the room, except Ki and the little captain, melted away through the entrances; so that in a matter

of seconds they two were left alone with the dead man.

Ki came out from behind the bar and took hold of the legs of Number Ten's dead body.

"Help me," he said. "He's heavy."

The little captain took the arms and together they carried the dead man around behind the bar and through a door there into a little room behind where Ki washed glasses. But they did not stop there, for in this room where the little captain had never been before, there turned out to be a further door. And Ki opened this and they went through it and down a short flight of metal stairs into a big echoing room filled with machinery of all sorts that hummed and whirled.

"This way," said Ki; and led the way, still holding the dead man's feet, to a huge box-like affair that was higher at the top than the little captain's head. Ki opened a door set in the front of it and a blast of heat came out.

"What's this?" cried the little captain.

"What do you think it is?" grunted Ki. "Did you think our heat and our light and our air came from nowhere? Our Underground is as self-contained as a spaceship; and this machinery is what purifies the water and the air and keeps us alive."

"I never thought—" stammered the little captain.

"You're a fool," said Ki, shortly. "Take his legs and help me shove him into the incinerator."

AFTER that, the little captain could never feel the same again. For some days he continued to go on with his work mechanically, but now it was all on tapes. The gatherings in the lounge were different. Now the Leaders and their people seemed to be wary of each other; and those who gathered there met in an atmosphere of brittle tenseness. The little captain saw this; he worried over it and thought very hard.

He did not want to go against the advice given him by the Doctor, who had always been so wise and helpful. But he began to think that the Doctor, immersed in his many duties, could not see the situation as clearly as he, himself, did. There was no doubt that the Leaders were falling in their duty to continue the fight against the enemy. At this rate they would never be ready to come forth and reconquer the country. The little captain thought of the millions of people under the false government set up by the enemy, sitting waiting for the Leaders to return and rescue them; and his heart turned within him. And so, finally, though it was a terrible step to take, the little captain determined that there was only one thing for him to do. And that was to inform Number One of the situation as it stood, for only Number One could repair the damage that had already been done the Resistance.

It was a big step to take; and the little captain quivered inside

at the thought of it. But the fact that it was his duty stiffened his spine and he went in full uniform to the entrance of Number One's apartment and asked to speak to the Supreme Leader.

After a short wait, the butler returned and took him in.

At first, when for the second time he came through the door of that inner room, the little captain thought he must have been taken to the wrong place by a mistake on the butler's part. There was no one there but a fat, sagging man, sprawled in an overstuffed chair, nibbling at some pieces of cheese.

"Well, what is it?" snapped the fat man, throatily. And the little captain stared, for the voice coming from the creature before him was the voice of Number One.

Wondering, he approached the seated man; and when he got close he saw indeed that it was Number One; but with all his appearance of firmness and brute strength drowned and lost in an ocean of fat.

"What is it, I say!" repeated the Supreme Commander.

"I—I have a thing of duty to report—" stammered out the little captain; and stumbled through his report that the broadcasts were being ignored, the other Leaders were quarrelling among themselves and that the work of the Resistance was being stifled by indifference.

When he had finished the gross man—it was almost impossible for the little captain still to think

of him as Number One—stared at him for a long time. Then he turned his head on its fat neck toward his butler.

"What kind of an idiot is this?" he demanded.

The butler raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

The fat man turned back once more to the little captain.

"Did you ever stop to think," he said, "that you live only because I gave the Doctor permission to save your life?"

The little captain bowed his head.

"Well then," wheezed Number One. "If you haven't the brains to understand a situation when it stares you in the face, get back to your microphones and stick with them and don't come bothering me about it." He turned to the butler. "See that he isn't let in here again."

The butler nodded.

"Now get out," ordered the First Leader.

They went.

STUNNED, the little captain wandered blindly down the main corridor. All his background, all his training, everything he had been taught to believe seemed tumbled in an incoherent mass which it was beyond the means of his poor brain to sort out. He caught himself drifting toward the main lounge; and checked himself and turned away. He did not want to face Kl, or anyone else who might be in there now, for a devil was pounding at his sanity.

Why?

Why had they given up? What straw had tipped the scales in the direction of defeat and indifference. What had happened? Why had they scrapped everything they believed in?

It was too big a question for the little captain. Something seemed to snap in his head and for quite a while he felt the real world entirely and went down into hell where he wandered around as a soul in torment until he found a rope marked *duty*; and with the help of that pulled himself back to life and sanity.

He found that he had made up his mind. He went in search of the Doctor and found him in his dispensary. The medical man got up quickly from behind his desk at the sight of the little captain's face and came around to him.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I went to see Number One," said the little captain with a great effort. And, prompted by the Doctor, he told him the whole story of the situation, as he had seen it; and his interview with the Supreme Commander.

When he had finished telling the story, the Doctor turned from him and took off his glasses and wiped them with hands that trembled.

"I should not have saved you," he said, brokenly. "No, I should not have saved you. But you reminded me of my own sons—" he broke off and looked back at the little captain. "My poor boy, what are you going to do now?"

"I am going to do my duty,"

said the little captain, squaring his shoulders. "Duty to what I believe is something that cannot be killed. If I cannot find it here I will find it elsewhere in the world. If I have to go to the ends of the world, I will find it."

"My poor boy—" whispered the Doctor.

"Neither poor nor a boy," said the little captain. "I am a man and a soldier. It is my duty to fight for the freedom of my people. If I cannot fight here, I will fight elsewhere. I want you to show me the way out of the Underground."

"No," said the Doctor. "No."

"Yes," replied the little captain. "If I can do nothing else, I can die as a soldier should, in combat with the enemy."

"But there is no army any more," protested the doctor. "There are no troops, no central authority."

"I will find them, or make them, or be them," said the little captain, inflexibly. "The fight is never lost as long as one man will fight on."

"You can do nothing," cried the Doctor. "Here you can be the voice of millions, if nothing else."

"A false voice," said the little captain. "Once and for all will you show me the way out?"

The Doctor wrung his hands.

"Very well," said the little captain. "I will find somebody else and force the information from him." And he turned toward the door.

"No. Stop," said the Doctor. "I will show you. Don't ask any-

one else." His voice was shaking. "Thank you," said the little captain, turning back. "I had faith that you would."

The Doctor fumbled his glasses on to his nose and led the way out of the dispensary and down the corridor. They continued on until they came to the main lounge. It was deserted except for Ki behind the bar and he grinned at them sardonically as they came up.

"I need the captain's help downstairs," said the Doctor. Ki grinned and held up a glass and breathed on it.

"You know the way, Doctor," he said.

THE Doctor and the little captain went behind the bar and into the little room and through the farther door and down the stairs.

They went past the machines, and past the incinerator—the little captain shuddered when he saw it—and finally beyond to a door set in a wall. It was a heavy steel door like a fire door; and the Doctor strained at it to open it.

They passed through it into dampness and darkness. But the Doctor reached out and a switch clicked, throwing the place where they stood into brilliant illumination from the bulbs overhead. The little captain looked around him. They stood in a corridor rough-hewn out of the rock, more tunnel than corridor. Water glistened on the granite walls, the moisture of the condensation;

and the floor was rough and slippery underfoot.

The Doctor led the way. They went up the corridor for a short distance, around a bend to the right of it; and into a little room barely larger than the corridor, that ended in a blank wall in which was set a large, circular door like the door of a bank vault.

"This is it," said the Doctor. He put his hands on the big metal bolt that secured it; but his strength seemed to fail him as he started to draw it. His hands fell limply and he turned to the little captain.

"For the last time," he said. "Will you stay? There is nothing you can do. Nothing!"

"I must go," said the little captain.

"To the end of the world?" choked the Doctor.

"To the end of the world."

The Doctor turned and laid his hands on the big bolt and pulled it back. On ponderous hinges, the vault-like door swung open. Before him the little captain saw what had been the entrance to an upslanting tunnel; but which now was filled and packed with fallen rock.

"It is like that all the way to the surface," said the Doctor's dead voice in his ear. "And it has been like that since the day we all entered here; and they blew up the tunnel behind us on the orders of Number One. So look at it. Look at it. For you and me, this is the end of the world." ●

Mel Cramer's job was to defend the Space Station in case of an enemy attack; still, there wasn't anything in the book to order him on a—

MARTYR'S FLIGHT

By HANK SEARLS

SOME of the anguish and bitterness and fear left Walter Stanton's heart as he gazed at the vista from the open landing-lock. It had been almost three months since the core of Space Station One had nudged itself into its silent orbit, but this, the only remaining view unhindered by the bulbous fuel storage tanks, still fascinated him. Now, as the nose of Cargo One crept backward into the blinding sunlight, he pulled himself further along the catwalk. He waved with his free hand at the pilot, Major Torrance, although he knew the Major could hardly be watching during the delicate manoeuvre. Then, while the massive hatch was still gaping, he looked earthward.

Twenty-five thousand miles away, half of the western hemisphere shone through the murky earth-haze, the other half still in darkness. Through force of habit he oriented himself by looking at the centre of the half-darkened sphere; there lay the Galapagos Islands. Then he traced the outline of the West Coast to Baja California and

thence to where he knew lay Sandia Base, New Mexico. He glanced at his watch; 7:00 a.m. Mountain Standard Time; Lynne would be making breakfast for Karen, soon to leave for school. He felt a stab of loneliness and a tug of envy for the men in Cargo II. Three skidding entries into the atmosphere; three swinging returns to space, and they would have decelerated enough to spiral to the incredible runway at Sandia. In twelve hours they would be home with their wives.

He watched as Torrance, drifting a hundred yards away, eased the massive nose to a westerly direction and then, with a tiny burst of power, slowed his relative speed enough to fall rapidly out of Space One's orbit. He sighed and swung himself around.

Colonel Mel Cramer was hanging on beside him, grotesquely familiar in the flight gear he used as a Topside Suit. Walter Stanton's earphones crackled.

"Wait, I'm going to take the *Mistress* out for a while and practice some marriages, if it's O.K. with you."

Walter Stanton glanced at the

lethal fighter ship nested across the landing-lock and essayed their old joke again, but his heart wasn't in it. "What would Marge say, Mel?"

Mel Cramer laughed. "She gave up to Mel's Mistress a year ago. O.K. to go?"

Walter Stanton thought of the letter in his pocket. "No, Mel, I think not." Then suddenly: "Is the Mistress armed . . . all ready to go?"

Mel sounded hurt. "Of course, Walt. She's always ready . . . Why?"

Stanton pulled himself to the hatch in the hub. "Meet me in Control, Mel. I want to talk to you."

WALTER STANTON belted himself to his desk chair and pulled out the letter from De La Rue, reading it again. He felt a surge of nostalgia at the Old Man's quaint English; the Secretary - General's white-hot internationalism had never impelled him to improve his languages. But there was nothing quaint about the contents of the letter . . .

Mel Cramer shuffled in with the strange gait that they had all developed within days of arriving in space. Automatically he snapped his safety belt to a grommet on Mel's desk, then sat on the top.

"What's on your mind, Walt?"

"This . . ." Walter Stanton handed him the letter. "Torrance brought it. I guess De La Rue didn't have enough to go on to

send a dispatch, so he wrote the letter."

Mel Cramer read the letter swiftly, smiling first at the whimsical phraseology and then suddenly frowning. He whistled.

"Sounds bad, Walter, sounds bad . . ."

"Torrance said Sandia Base is on a 24-hour alert."

"God," Mel said desperately. "I wish Marge would leave that place. Why can't she move to the country somewhere?"

"She feels like Lynne, probably . . . That if we're here, the least she can do is stay as close as possible . . ."

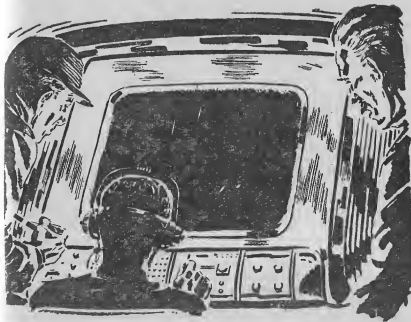
"As close as possible," Mel said bitterly. He lit a cigarette. "Walt, have you heard anything about my relief?"

Walter Stanton felt a stab of anger at his friend. Professionally ambitious, Mel had fought for his job as Platform Fighter Pilot; now, with the decline of Space One in the eyes of the military, he probably had his eyes on other fields. Carefully controlling his voice, he said: "No, Mel. Nothing's come in. Why?"

Mel Cramer shrugged. "I don't know . . . They said three months, that's all. And it's been nearly fourteen weeks . . ." He laughed. "Kind of feel like the world's passing me by. Joke, Walter."

Walter Stanton took back the letter and folded it carefully. Then, on second thought, he lit a match and burned it.

"I asked you in for advice, Mel," he said carefully, watching the



flickering flame.

"You bet. Shoot."

"If it starts, what are the wheels going to do? The brass?" Mel laughed. "You asking me? I'm just a light colonel."

"You're the senior military man aboard. All I want is your opinion."

Mel's brow furrowed. For a long moment he was silent, and Walter Stanton heard the ceaseless whine of the ventilators. *Space Two, when and if it's built*, he thought irrationally, *had better have ventilators that don't cry like a cat in pain.*

"Well, Mel?"

"I think," Mel Cramer said

thoughtfully, "they'll suggest that we evacuate."

WALTER STANTON slapped his hand on the desk and swung in his chair. "I knew it! Can't they see? Can't they see at all?"

"Walter," Mel said quietly. "Let's face it. From a military standpoint, Space One is a failure."

"The Russians don't seem to think so. Even with the agreement in their pocket, they're still screaming."

Mel shook his head doggedly. "Militarily, it's a failure."

"It's not a failure," Mel barked.

He unsnapped his belt, shuffled to the centre of the compartment, and kicked open the cover of a port in the rim-deck. "Look at that! Look at those stars, Mel. No one's ever had a crack at them like this. The astronomers, and astro-physicists, have learned more from Mike and Andre in the last three months than they have in the last three centuries." As the rim rotated, the earth came majestically into view. "Look at that," Stanton said. "See that cold front over the Sierras? Petrovski's data has given them forecasts down there that they've never conceived of." He waved his hand expansively. "Vacuum! Billions and billions of cubic miles of hard, hard vacuum. Trippler goes nuts at the thought of it. Any physicist, any electronic engineer, would. Temperature? Absolute zero. Absolute zero, Mel. Where else can you get absolute zero? Can't they see what it means?"

Mel Cramer ground out his cigarette.

"What does absolute zero mean, Walt? To a general?"

Walter kicked shut the hatch. "I don't know. I just don't know..."

"Walt, this deal was oversold to the military. You know it, and I know it. Frankly, you helped oversell it."

Walter Stanton swung around angrily. "You're right, Mel. But the end justified the means. We needed the funds; only the military could provide them. And it is useful to them; it will be, when

it's finished. It would be now, if—"

"If we could break the agreement and leave the Galapagos Islands for a spin around the world."

"No!" Walter Stanton held his friend's eyes. "That isn't what I meant. This platform wasn't meant for spying; the millions of man-hours weren't spent for that. It's a U.N. deal, Mel, and we needed the agreement; we had to see that the Russians kept hands-off. If the price is an orbit that keeps us at earth-surface speed; if we have to stay on our side of the iron curtain, O.K. We agreed to it, and by God if we grow roots down to Galapagos we're staying here."

Mel shrugged. "That isn't the point. The wheels know that in case of war you'd change orbits. If they thought it was worth while, they'd order you to. The U.N. could order you to. What they doubt is that if you moved your orbit in behind the Curtain you'd see enough to do any good."

"I don't care to argue that point. Right now, probably not. When the scope's completed and installed, we'll undoubtedly be able to spot concentrations and new industries. The main thing would be to stay with the station. But it's an academic question—"

"Is it an academic question whether they can blow us out of the sky?"

Walter Stanton shot him a glance. "That's your department. Can they?"

"Let's not kid ourselves. If they have a missile they can get up

here, it'll track you. Manned or unmanned, regardless of what your orbit is or where you are."

"The theory is, Mel, that Grand Control Centre will intercept."

"Walter!" Cramer's lip twisted sardonically. "I'm surprised! You didn't fall for that mullarkey, did you? How are they going to intercept anything with a head start?"

"Another part of the theory, Mel, is that you'll intercept if they don't. Intercept it and destroy it..."

"Destroy it..." For a sickening moment Walter Stanton thought he read fear in his friend's eye. Mel said quietly: "Destroy it and try to get to Sandia..." He stood up. "And suppose they have another missile? Who destroys that?"

"Even a guided missile would cost almost as much as our original core. Do you think they've built one, let alone two?"

"We'd sure find out in a hurry. We'd be their first target."

"And their second would probably be Sandia," Walt said thoughtfully.

"Don't say that!" Mel shouted. Walter looked at him in surprise. "Don't. Don't say that," Mel said again, more softly. There was a long silence. The ventilators whined. Mel passed his hand over his face. "Those damned ventilators... How about my taking Mel's Mistress out now? Just for while?"

Walter Stanton glanced sympathetically at his friend. *He wants*

to get away from the platform, even a few thousand yards. And I can't blame him!

"Sure, Mel. You've read the letter now, and you know how much fuel you have, so it's up to you."

Mel Cramer grimaced. "Yeah, fuel. Well, I guess I'll skip it. I'm going to hit the sack."

Walter Stanton stared after him thoughtfully...

A T dinner the talk was all of war; Peters, the Australian fuelman and part time cook, flicked a switch in the galley and flooded the Platform's P.A. system with the 10 p.m. news from Dallas. Petroski, the Russians' originally unwelcome contribution to the project, but undeniably one of the worlds' top meteorologists, was embarrassed, and the rest of the Team tried to keep the talk on an objective, international plane. But Walter Stanton felt the strain and as Project Head tried to change the subject.

"Why we had to draft an Australian cook, with two Frenchmen on the team," he said toying with his custard. "I'll never know."

Peters' voice from the galley said: "It's because one of the bloody Frenchman think a cheese soufflé is a new galaxy and the other thinks it's English for a cosmic particle. Besides, I don't see anybody losing weight."

"That's because—" began Walter Stanton, and felt a tug at his sleeve. It was Lang, the young radar plotter and radio operator. "Lieutenant Goldstein just

broke this, sir," he said, handing him a dispatch. Something in his eyes chilled Walter Stanton. He read the message and cold fear squeezed him. He looked up.

"Gentlemen," he said, raising his hand. "Can I have your attention?"

The talk died. Petrovski, apparently guessing the contents of the dispatch, looked sick. Mel Cramer was staring at his glass.

"Gentlemen," Walter Stanton said quietly, "this is it. Mel, we were wrong. We weren't the first target. Neither was Sandia. They just bombed New York."

There was deathly silence for a long moment, while each man rifled through his thoughts. "Christ!" somebody swore.

"I've been advised by Ground Control to stand by to evacuate. Cargo One is refueling to take us off."

An angry babble broke out around the table. Velez, the tiny Brazilian astronomer, jumped up angrily. "Evacuate? But the platform! What happens to it?"

Stanton shrugged. "Uncorrected perturbations build up, and eventually it either skids off into space or falls into the atmosphere and burns. Or maybe," he said bitterly, "we're supposed to jettison it ourselves. Sink it in space before we leave, like a crew abandoning a submarine."

Velez went white. "But the effort in building this; the time of the thousands of scientists and billions of dollars; what becomes of them?"

"They apparently consider the

Platform a sitting duck, and are kind enough to take a chance on evacuating us."

Howard, a grey, unemotional power plant expert, a grim man whom Walter Stanton barely liked, sat back and folded his hands. He spoke with dogged emphasis.

"This project has taken the best of science for the last four years. It has held up research in other fields, and justifiably so. I do not propose to let four years of mankind's progress go spinning off into space alone, war or no war, Russians or no Russians. I shall not leave it. I'm a civilian, and I refuse to go. Is that clear?"

Walter Stanton stifled a wild impulse to laugh at the thought of Howard spinning alone and infinitely through space. Suddenly he liked the man.

"Any other comments?"

Velez bristled like a bantam rooster. "I shall stay with Senor Howard."

Walter Stanton set his jaw. "If I give the word, we'll evacuate, all of us. If I give the word." He glanced down the row of faces. "I'm toying with the idea of allowing volunteers to stay."

There was a chorus of assent. With a chill, Walter Stanton remembered Petrovski. He glanced at him and the big Russian, blonde and bespectacled, arose ponderously and leaned on the table.

"Gentlemen . . . Could I speak?"

"Go ahead, Skl," somebody said.

"I . . . I don't know whether those people who rule my country

are capable of destroying this. . . this marvellous thing. I do not know whether they would *want* to destroy it . . ." He took off his glasses and polished them fiercely. "But if you would allow me . . . If it could be arranged . . . I should like to stay . . ."

Walter Stanton, touched, cleared his throat. He spoke quietly.

"And if it were turned into a weapon against your country?"

Petrovski looked as if he were about to cry. "If my country tries to destroy this wonderful thing of science . . . Then it is no more my country . . . And I would still like to stay . . ."

"Yes," said Stanton, a little embarrassed. "Well, we'll see . . ."

Mel Cramer leaned back suddenly in his seat. "Could a beat-up old light colonel have a few words, seeing as how this project is slipping rapidly from your league into mine?"

Walter Stanton gazed at him quizzically. "Of course, Mel. Go ahead."

"You guys are all full of bull," Cramer leaned forward, counting on his fingers. "In the first place, you wouldn't have a chance if they've got a missile that can get here. In the second place, you wouldn't do any good if you did stay. In the third place, if they tell you to get out, you'll get out. Period. Is that clear?"

Walter Stanton felt his blood rise. "Just a second. The Air Force *advises* us; and UN *tells* us. Let's keep that straight."

"Buddy," said Mel, "if I know

War, it isn't going to be that way very long . . ."

The intercom system burst into life. That flat, nasal voice of Lieutenant Goldstein, the sharp young Air Force radar officer, crackled through the room.

"Colonel Cramer, Mr. Stanton. Would you come to Control? I've picked up a missile. It think it's headed for us . . ."

WITH the dim orange light of the PPI radar scope gleaming on his sharp features, Goldstein looked like some interested youngster staring into a campfire.

"It's on a tangential orbit now, just breaking into the exosphere—I'll be able to give you its free flight velocity in a minute."

"Was it three stage or two?" Cramer asked.

"Two, sir, apparently."

"So far," Mel Cramer said. "If it accelerates again, we'll know for sure."

From the huge transparent board behind them the plotter, Airman Lang, spoke. "I make it 700 knots relative to Platform speed, sir."

"Give or take a few hundred," murmured Goldstein . . . "Oops . . . I think she's started another burn-out period . . ."

"She's accelerating, sir," said Lang. "But fast . . ."

They watched the tiny pip while Goldstein worked with his cranks and dials. "Spatial velocity will be about 1300 knots relative, sir."

"Well," said Cramer. "At least I could catch it on a second pass

... if I missed." He coughed nervously. "How much time have we got?"

The circuit to Ground Control burst into life. "Space One, Space One, this is Ground Control. We have a missile on our scope from relay Four. Altitude four hundred miles, relative velocity 1370, Latitude "

Mel Cramer picked up the mike. "OK, OK, ground control. We have it." He smiled bitterly and added: "I assume you're intercepting with a missile."

There was a long silence, then: "Mel, this is General Staves. You know damn well we can't intercept. We just picked it up, and we're too late."

Mel sounded cheerful enough, but Walter Stanton blanched as he saw the hand shaking on the mike.

"OK, General. We'll see what we can do. What's the status of Cargo One?"

"She's still taking fuel. We may be able to evacuate you if you can get this first one."

Walter Stanton took the mike. "General, this is Stanton. If he gets this one, we don't intend to evacuate."

There was a shocked silence, and then the general's dry voice. "You'll evacuate, all right. And I suggest you take evasion action, in spite of your agreement."

"We are, General, I'm shortening our orbit now."

"If you see anything good over Russia," the General said, "let us know. New York you won't see."

"Always joking," said Airman

Lang bitterly. "That's the General."

Walter Stanton faced Mel Cramer in the darkness. "Well, Mel . . ."

Mel tried to laugh, but his voice sounded tight. "Well, Walter . . ."

"It's up to you, Mel. The whole shebang."

Mel's mouth worked dryly and he nodded. "Yep. Guess . . . Guess I better suit up . . ."

WALTER Stanton waited inside the hub, gazing through the port at the tiny fighter across the landing-lock. *I wish . . . I wish it were me who could fly it*, he thought desperately. He ran his hand along the support rail, as if caressing the metal and plastic of the Platform. He remembered the dreams, the toil, the heartbreak, far back to when men laughed at the concept of a platform in space. He thought of the pioneers of rocket work, some of them dead; the men at Peenemünde using their brains for war but even so adding painstakingly to the fund of knowledge. He thought of the moment of blinding elation three months before, when the last reactor had been cut off and the core of Space One swung easily into her orbit. *If only Mel could understand . . . Better yet, if I could fly . . .* He knew certainly that he himself would give his life to save the Platform; knew surely that Lynne would understand. But would Mel Cramer give his life? For his country, probably; for his home

and family, surely; but for what he seemed to consider a useless scientific gadget?

He heard a movement and turned. Mel Cramer, massive in his flight gear, but with his helmet off, was standing behind him. His face was drawn.

"Well, Walter, wish me luck."

"Mel . . . Do you know what this means? Really?"

"My indoctrination is complete, if that's what you mean. I can't agree with you that the world will fall apart if Space One isn't a success, but the world's falling apart anyway, so it really doesn't matter. I'll make my passes as close as possible."

And if you miss? thought Walter Stanton. *What will you do? Will you make another pass, a sacrificial pass.* He wished for a moment that their culture embodied the Oriental concept of patriotism; the disregard for human life, the fatalistic belief in some paradise for battle-dead.

"Mel," he said suddenly, forcing the words. "What happens if you miss?"

Mel Cramer's jaw tightened. "Just a minute, Walt," he said slowly. "I don't quite know what you're getting at, but I have an idea. Are you suggesting that I fly into that thing?"

There was a long silence, and the ventilators whined.

Walter nodded his head slowly. "Yes, Mel. If necessary."

Mel Cramer stared at him. "This isn't a Japanese kamikaze pilot you're talking to! This is Mel Cramer. I was an ace as a

kid in Korea, and nobody ever accused me of being yellow, but I didn't sign up for this job to commit suicide. That isn't the way we do it. That's why I'm carrying rockets instead of a war-head full of tetryl. And it's why we win wars; we don't sacrifice men we've got; we give them every chance."

Walter Stanton said: "It's not my prerogative to ask you to sacrifice yourself. It's just that . . . This project . . ."

"Everybody on this project is a volunteer."

"It isn't us; it's the Platform."

"Everybody on the Platform is a volunteer," Mel Cramer repeated doggedly. "Everyone knew the chances he was taking. And there isn't a one of them who loves his wife and kid anymore than I do."

Through the sickness of his disappointment, Walter Stanton forced a grin. "O.K., Mel. My love to Marge when you get to Sandia; and tell Lynne . . . tell her . . ."

"I'll tell her you'll be back on Cargo One by tomorrow," Mel Cramer said. "If," he added softly, "I make it to Sandia Base, and if Sandia Base is still there . . ."

Cramer glanced through the port at the mechanic waiting to help him into the tiny fighter, shivered a little, snapped on his helmet and stepped out to the catwalk. Walter Stanton watched through the port as the huge air-lock opened and Mel Cramer eased the *Mistress* out, She

nestled next to the Platform like a small, angry wasp near a hive, power off, waiting for intercept data from Goldstein in Control. Walter Stanton felt chill race up his back. He started up the ladder.

GOLDSTEIN had flicked on the remote telescreen and was watching it, with one eye on the PPI scope. The screen came to life, and Walter Stanton saw a clear picture of Space One as Mel Cramer pointed the *Mistress* at the platform to aid in focussing.

"O.K., Colonel," Goldstein said "Screen controls locked."

"Screen controls locked," Mel Cramer's voice repeated. The image of Space One disappeared from the screen as the *Mistress* swung to the East, paralleling the motion of the platform in space, ready to add its speed to that of the artificial satellite. "Heading zero-nine-zero," said Cramer. "Ready to launch."

"Blast for ten seconds," said Goldstein, "and stand by for intercept information."

"Blasting." Cramer's voice seemed strained. Then: "Power off! Swinging!"

Walter Stanton stared at the telescreen, a duplicate of Mel's screen, and the very eyes of the *Mistress*, since her windshield would be covered against the sandblasting meteoric dust until the last seconds of the firing run. The time seemed to press on the back of his neck, and he felt his head ache with the strain. The

ventilators moaned. Goldstein spoke suddenly.

"Missile eight hundred miles earthward, rate of closure 480 knots, twelve o'clock from you." His voice rose slightly. "Have you got it, Colonel? Is it on your screen?"

There was an aching void of silence, then: "Affirm! I have it. Commencing first pass!"

Walter Stanton became suddenly aware that Radar Control was cawed. He heard Peters' voice: "How many runs can he make?"

"Two runs; he'll fire two proximity rockets per pass. They ought to track the missile."

"Yeah," said Lang dryly. "It's all doped out. This science is wonderful . . ."

Walter Stanton jumped as an image of the missile appeared on the telescreen. From a tiny flash it grew quickly more bright until it was a circle on the screen. "Locked!" grated Cramer's voice. "Firing!"

Two streaks appeared at the bottom of the screen and darted for the circle. Walter Stanton heard a gasp of relief in the compartment as they sped true, straight for the centre. Then, amazingly, the streaks wobbled erratically and streaked away. The circle of light moved slowly downward off the screen as Mel Cramer pulled up.

"Missed," breathed Goldstein. "Brother . . ."

Mel Cramer's voice cut into the silence. It was strained and uncertain. "I think it's jamming my

control heads . . . Putting out strips, maybe. I'm making another pass."

"Thanks, Colonel," whispered Lang from the plotting board. "This is what Uncle pays you for . . . Let's earn it . . ."

For an eternity they waited, and again the circle appeared in the centre of the screen. "Locked," Mel Cramer said. Closer and closer moved the light, and for a moment Walter Stanton had a wild burst of hope. The target seemed too close to miss. The two rockets streaked for it, reaching hungrily. Then they wobbled again and disappeared from the screen as Mel Cramer pulled up. There was a chilling silence in the room.

"Well," said Goldstein, "that does it. We've got . . . let's see . . . 176 seconds, if anyone cares to know."

Mel Cramer's voice came into the room as if from the grave. "It . . . It was jamming . . . I was right on!"

"Excuses, Colonel," muttered Lang. "Always excuses . . ."

Goldstein talked into the mike. "Colonel, I suggest you commence your braking ellipse immediately. I don't know what effect the explosion will have in this orbit, but I think you'd better leave it."

Walter Stanton turned desperately to Goldstein. "Goldie, is it certain? We've got to save the platform! Suppose I use full reactors, shorten our orbit even faster?"

"It won't matter, sir." He jammed his thumb at the PPI

scope. "That thing's tailing us like a flying cadet after a WAF. It'd follow us all the way back to Sandia if we could get there."

Walter Stanton felt the Platform, his dream, pulsing around him. For a moment he felt an affection even for the maddening wail of the ventilators. Behind him, he knew, were some of the best brains in science; men whose concepts cut across the lines of nationalism; who by their presence on the Platform showed that they disregarded the very instinct of self-preservation in the search for Truth. And he felt the presence too of the thousands below who had helped make the Platform a reality. He took a deep breath. Then he picked up the microphone and spoke to his friend.

"Mel, this is Walt. I've just received a dispatch. Do not—repeat—do not land at Sandia. Suggest you try to use White Sands."

Mel's startled voice came back. "Why?"

Walter Stanton felt his hands grow clammy.

"They just destroyed Sandia Base."

Goldstein gaped at him. "What . . . What are you telling him?" He moved for the mike, but Walter Stanton shook his head.

The speaker cracked. "Destroyed? Sandia destroyed?"

"Entirely."

"The—The dependents' quarters too?"

Walter Stanton forced out the words. "Everything, Mel."

There was a long silence, and then Mel Cramer spoke, and his voice was tired. "Vector me, Goldie."

Goldstein said: "To White Sands, Colonel?"

Behind the tiredness and the sadness Walter Stanton caught a hint of strength in the voice that came back.

"To the missile . . ."

Goldstein hesitated, looked at Walter Stanton.

"Do it, son," said Stanton . . .

HE could never afterwards remember how long he had been sitting at his desk when Goldstein tapped on the hatch and entered, carrying a message. The lean youth looked down at him.

"First, sir, I want to say that I understand . . ."

Walter Stanton looked at him gratefully. "You know it wasn't to save us . . . Just the Platform . . ."

"I know it, and it took more guts than I've ever seen. But you'll need guts for this too, sir . . ."

He handed Stanton the message.
FROM: EARTH CONTROL
CENTRE
TO: SPACE ONE
SANDIA BASE DESTROYED

ENEMY BOMBING ATTACK STAVES.

The dull throbbing ache started in his chest, and he knew that it might live with him for the rest of his life. He let the message fall.

"If you get a list of dependent casualties, call a conference immediately."

"Yes sir. Anything else, sir?"

He forced himself to forget Lynne and Karen and concentrate on the new problems. He moved to the deck-port and kicked open the cover. On their shortened orbit they were moving in relation to the earth's surface now; the west coast of Africa lay below.

"Did Cargo One get launched?"

"No, sir. Destroyed while fueling."

One of the problems, then, would be starvation; Cargo Two was months from completion. But at least, if they could survive, they'd have a chance to prove themselves; to prove the value of the Platform in war as well as peace; to save the tiny satellite for its intended use. He turned to Goldstein.

"Pass the word for that conference now. We've got some high-powered IQ's up here and there's a war going on. Maybe we can make it the last one . . ." ●

SELLING POINT

By NORMAN ARKAWY

A new industry blossomed when U.S. Robot Co. put their perfected models on the market. Perfected? Nobody had considered the one defect!

"GOOD morning, madam," Ira said. "I represent . . ."
"We don't want any," said the woman, easing the door shut.

With the time tested finesse of door-to-door salesmen, Ira slipped his size twelve shoe between the swinging door and the jamb. "But madam, if you'll give me a few minutes of your time . . ."

The woman shook her head. "It won't do you any good," she said, trying to squeeze the door shut over his foot. "Whatever it is, we don't want any."

"I represent U. S. Robot Company," Ira persisted. He smiled pleasantly. His unyielding foot maintained a six inch wide avenue of communication between himself and the woman in the house. "Long the leader in commercial and industrial mechanicals, U. S. Robot is now introducing a new line of home servants, designed to assist the housewife in every possible task about the house."

"You're wasting your time," the woman said wearily.

Ira used his professional smile

to indicate that he enjoyed wasting time. "When you've seen the demonstration," he said, "I'm sure you'll agree that no home should be without a Model I household robot."

The woman looked out at him silently, patiently, resigned. She was pretty and petite and very young; and, from her appearance, had never done a day's work in her life. A typical newlywed, Ira thought. A perfect prospect, he decided.

"As you undoubtedly know, the outstanding characteristics of U. S. Robot mechanicals have always been ability, durability and reliability. Their performance in industry has earned for the United States Robot Company the enviable reputation it is proud to possess: 'Leader in the art, artists of the trade—if it's U. S. Robot, it's perfect!'"

The woman smiled and allowed the door to swing open slightly. "What about Amalgamated Androids?" she asked. "I understand they've got some pretty good models, too."

"Well," Ira admitted, "some of their models are pretty good;

adequate, perhaps. But why take anything but the best? And, of course, our robots . . ."

"I've seen some AA models that are perfect," the woman said. A suggestion of a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "How can yours be better than perfect?"

Ira's voice took on a confidential complexion. "Some of their models are beautiful," he conceded. "And they may seem to work well when they're new. But they're not built to last, like ours. Why . . ."

"I think," the woman tried to interrupt, "that some of . . ."

"How can you compare them to U. S. Robot?" Ira ran on. "We have had forty-seven years of experience in producing mechanicals for the most difficult jobs imaginable. Amalgamated Androids while producing an adequate household model, does not have the valuable know-how to build into their mechanicals the strength and quality that is taken for granted in every machine bearing the U. S. Robot label."

The woman was sceptical. "Maybe your company does make the best factory hands," she argued, "but household robots must be aesthetic as well as rugged. And Amalgamated Androids are specialists in building humanoid robots, while your company . . ."

"But, madam," Ira said, grinning. "Our household models are perfectly human in appearance—I should say, imperfectly human because we even give them tiny

blemishes to make them seem more natural."

THE woman was obviously unconvinced. Ira applied the clincher. "What greater proof could you want than this?" He held up his left hand, baring his wrist so that she could read his identification stamp.

Model I (Masc.)

Serial No. 27146 12V

U. S. ROBOT CO., INC.

The woman's eyes widened. Her face took on an expression of delighted surprise.

"What better proof could you want?" Ira repeated. "Do I look like a robot? Am I not a perfect humanoid? Here," he said, extending his hand, "feel my skin and see if it isn't just like a man's."

The woman gingerly touched his hand. Her eyes mirrored her satisfaction.

Ira pressed his advantage. "Model I robots come in both masculine and feminine designs, built to your individual specifications as to size, colouring, strength, personality traits, apparent age, and so forth. For example, lonely people can have companionship built in, if they like. You can have an Ira or Inez possessing an almost human intelligence and free choice, or you can get one that in blindly servile and which will volunteer advice or information. You can get an elderly, refined butler or a handsome young man-around-the-house. You can get a pretty petite parlour maid or a buxom cook."

Ira paused to observe his customer. She was looking at him in a peculiar way. Knowing that he was a robot, she seemed to be appraising him as she would a man. Ira noted her odd reaction and puzzled over it. It usually went the other way—women lost interest in him when they learned that he was not a man.

"Why don't you come inside," the woman suggested suddenly, opening the door for him.

Ira smiled at her graciously and went into the house. Her reaction was not so puzzling, after all, he decided. A young and virtuous wife would feel the conventional fears that were "built into her" by society. She had to be careful. It was conceivably dangerous to be alone in the house with a handsome man. But, if he's a robot, she has nothing to fear—from him or herself.

"Sit down," the woman said, "and rest a while."

"Thank you, madam," He sat. "But, of course, I don't need the rest. Model I's can do strenuous work for twenty-three out of every twenty-four hours. In fact, in laboratory tests, they've been run for one hundred and eighty-six hours continuously, without a breakdown."

He was back in his sales pitch. "Work is the basic function of all U. S. Robot Company robots. With all their aesthetic perfection, the household models are no exception to this rule. They are unequalled in efficient performance. Power is the keynote of the Model I."

He opened his demonstration case and removed a steel bar, three inches in diameter. Placing one hand on each end, he bent the metal into a V.

"The heart of the mechanism," he went on, "is a powerful twelve volt A-battery, perfectly shielded and guaranteed to give trouble-free service for at least forty years. Sixteen motor centres are fed by the central power plant, all co-ordinated and synchronised by the best electronic brain ever devised. Sturdy TS steel alloy construction over all gives the Model I its phenomenal strength and durability. And the surface tissue, made of a new patented miracle material, combines the best features of aesthetic and functional performance."

The woman was obviously impressed. Lips slightly parted, she watched Ira attentively and listened breathlessly to everything he said. Instinctively, he felt that he had made a sale. But the woman said nothing; only gazed at him in a way that might have been covetous, might have been adoring or might have been merely symptomatic of hypnosis.

"May I demonstrate the I's power and versatility in practical performance?" Ira asked. Taking her silence to be consent, he swung into his demonstration.

SWIFTLY, surely, he went about the room, cleaning. Effortlessly, he lifted large pieces of furniture and, holding them aloft with his right hand, he cleaned under them with his

left. He talked as he worked. "Notice the quiet efficiency of the self - cleansing electro - static duster we have built in. We also have attachments for waxing, spraying, painting, ironing, soldering . . ."

"You're wonderful," the woman sighed.

"And let me point out," Ira pursued, eager to clinch the sale, "that the Model I is so life-like that, in normal operation, it is almost completely silent. Only a faint throbbing—like that of a human heart—is noticeable."

The woman cocked her head to a side. "I don't hear anything," she said.

Ira smiled triumphantly. "Of course, you don't! Come here," he said. "Put your ear to my chest and you'll just be able to make it out."

She rested her head on his chest and listened. The delicate fragrance of her perfume mingled with that sweet human scent that not even the Model I robots could imitate. Ira bent his head and brushed his sensitised cheek against her hair. He felt emotions that no robot should feel.

He silently cursed his makers and the wonderful human brain they had given him. Their theory was that a salesman, to be effective, should think exactly like a human being. To better satisfy the customers, he should appreciate every human drive and desire. But it was wrong to feel like a man, to desire like a man, to hurt like a man and be unable to ease the pain because he was

not a man! For once, U. S. Robot had gone too far!

The woman looked up at him with the eyes that broadcast adoration. "You're wonderful!" she repeated. "Do you think . . .?" She hesitated, looked away. "Could I be in love with you?" she asked with child-like innocence. "Is it possible?"

Ira felt flustered, giddy, light-headed, exultant, confused, miserable and weak. Damn U. S. Robot and their perfected fluid-electronics! "But madam," he protested, "I'm not a man! I'm only a . . ."

"Please call me Emma," the woman said. "You see, I'm not Mrs. Bartlett. I've tried to tell you—Madam is not at home. I only work here."

Gone was his exultant feeling, gone the light-headedness. Only the misery and weakness remained in the realisation that his yearning was impossible of fulfillment and that, to top it off, he had wasted his time trying to sell himself to a servant.

"Do you think I could?" the maid repeated.

"Could what?"

"Be in love with you."

"But, miss don't you understand? I'm not . . ."

"My name is Emma," she said softly. She smiled and he fought down an overwhelming urge to touch her, to kiss her pink, inviting lips. He stood rigid. He wanted to cry out in his torment.

Her hand reached out to him and he felt her fingers touch his. Electricity tingled up his arm and

through his chest. Automatically, he repeated his cursed disavowal of humanness. Vaguely, he heard his own words, sounding like an echo in his ears. "I'm a robot."

"I know," Emma said quietly. Then, she held up her right hand, revealing the identification stamp on her wrist.

Model M (fem.)

Serial No. 6139 12 V

*AMALGAMATED ANDROIDS,
INC.*

A moment later the android was in his arms. He held her close, dizzy with the sensation of this new emotion with one of his own kind.

Several moments later he pushed her gently away from him. "Pack your bag, Emma," he said.

She looked at him starry-eyed but quizzically. "But my work—madam will be furious—"

"Your bag, Emma," he repeated.

"When our companies built us they made us as near human as possible—perhaps too much so. If we can work for humans we can also live like them. U. S. Robots and Amalgamated Androids have just lost two employees. Your bag."

Being an android she could work faster than any human counter-part; her bag was packed in nothing flat. ●

Jules' Barnes assignment was to write a play which which save Earth from an invasion; he wrote well — and yet the crucial scene was—

NOT IN THE SCRIPT

By ARNOLD MARMOR

COLEN Shratt studied his image in the silver-framed mirror. His moustache was neatly clipped, his face clean shaven and well tanned. His captain's uniform—light blue—was pressed and looked as if it had just been bought. He was fastidious in everything he did.

He looked away from the mirror as the valet approached.

"Mr. Barnes is ready to see you, sir," the valet said.

"Good."

Captain Shratt was ushered into a study where Jules Barnes was waiting.

"Won't you be seated?" Barnes invited.

The captain sat, laid his cap on his knee.

"A drink?"

"No, thank you."

"Mind if I have one?"

"Of course not."

Barnes fixed himself a drink. He seated himself on a sofa, leaned back and said: "Now what's it all about? What would an intelligence officer want with me?"

"I'm not only representing the Americas at this moment, Mr.

Barnes, but all of earth as well. I'm here to ask you to do a service for the world."

"A service?" Barnes sipped at his drink. "You must be mistaken about me, captain. I'm just a playwright."

"But I haven't made a mistake, Mr. Barnes. And you can save the world. Just by writing a play."

"Oh, come now."

"Mr. Barnes, within two months we shall have a visitor from Mars."

Jules Barnes finished his drink. "You don't say?"

"I do say."

"Are you sure you won't have a drink? Or have you had too many?"

"Mind if I use your phone?"

"Go right ahead."

The captain dialled a number, said into the mouthpiece: "General? . . . Shratt. I'm at Barnes . . . Yes. Of course. Have the President put on, will you?" The captain turned to Barnes "You'd recognise the voice of William Livingstone, the President of the Americas, wouldn't you?"

Barnes nodded his head silently. He took the receiver from

Shratt and listened gravely.

The captain watched the playwright put down the receiver. "Well?" he said.

Barnes sat down, gulped noisily. "I'm listening."

"We're going to have a visitor from the planet Mars. Now supposedly, they will be on a friendly mission. But that will not be so. Their purpose is to determine our strength. If they decide we are ahead in nuclear physics and rocketship expansion we will be attacked. If they decide we are behind in experiments we will be safe."

"I don't understand. Why shouldn't they attack us if they know we are weak?"

"They're not in any great hurry. If they believe we are strong and ready to launch rocket ships into space then they will stop us, determined we should never leave our planet to conquer space. If they believe we are weak and backward, they will let us alone, for the time being. As long as we aren't a threat then they'll feel safe, ready to conquer us at their own sweet time. They move when they think we're strong, ready to blast ships into space, ready to conquer the stars. Till then they'll let us alone, knowing we're weak and ineffectual."

"How do you know all this?" Barnes asked, moving to make himself and Shratt drinks. This time, the captain accepted his drink. "How can you possibly know of their plans?"

"We've picked up their ship by radar. We've been listening in on

their conversations with Mars through a new I. B. M. machine. And Germany has sent their best code experts to give a hand. They broke down the language. And the messages between Mars and their ship was in code. So the experts did a double job, and well too, I might add. All the governments of the world have been alerted. They're all ready to co-operate."

"Well where do I come in?"

"We want you to write a play."

"A play?"

"Yes. A play. And every industry on earth will be a participant. You will write and direct. The world will be the stage. Don't you see? You will write and direct every move that will convince the Martians we are backward, we are nothing, we are insignificant. They must be convinced our industry doesn't compare with theirs, our brains are childish to theirs, our leaders are weak and ineffectual, our weapons mere toys. You must write this play before they get here. It will be your triumph. It will be the play of all plays. It will be the play that will save the world from destruction. It must be written within a month. That's what we want you to do."

"Within a month? That's impossible."

"A month to write the play. A month to rehearse. Not even a month to rehearse. You have to get busy on it right away."

"But how far are you advanced? Can you conquer space tomorrow?"

"Of course not."

"Then why go to all this trouble? Just let them see for themselves the way things really are. We can't possibly hurt them now. Why bother putting on an act for them?"

"We are advanced to some degree, of course. Progress can't be stopped. But we don't want them to know exactly how advanced we are. They are our enemy, you must remember that. We have to show them we are weaker than we really are."

"I see your logic."

"Good. You will co-operate with us, then?"

"Of course."

"You realise that it must be a silent triumph for you, if we are successful."

"Of course. I'm at your service."

"You will start immediately. I'll keep in touch with you daily. You'll need facts and figures, of course. You'll get a list of industry heads, scientists, and military men. They'll all be meeting our Martians. They must have their lines to read, their every movements that will convince the Martians of our stupidity."

"It's going to be some political football at the next election. You can't keep the politicians silent."

"Oh yes, we can."

"This will be more like a project than a play."

"I'll have to take my leave now, Mr. Barnes." The Captain stood up. "I have many matters to attend to."

"Of course. Good day, captain."

JULES Barnes worked on his play every waking hour. His eyes grew tired, his fingers grew stiff, his brain grew weary. The play was finished in twenty-five days. He handed it to Captain Shratt and went to sleep five minutes later.

Captain Shratt shrugged off all suggestion of getting a top Broadway director to handle the second assignment, that of directing the participants of the play. So Jules Barnes directed the military, the industry, the sciences, in their performances which would take place when the adversary would come face to face with the earth's genius.

Barnes and Shratt went from government to government by jet, meeting the brains of each power, directing and coaching.

"Finished," Captain Shratt said, leaning back in his seat as the jet took off for Washington.

"What if it doesn't come off?" Barnes said.

"Don't think about it."

Barnes felt his stomach jump toward his back as the ship hummed its way towards the heavens. He still hadn't gotten used to the jets. When the plane levelled off, he said: "We could always capture the Martians, hold them as hostages."

"Do you possibly think they hold as great a price on life as we do? Their philosophy is as different from ours as night and day."

"You seem to know an awful lot about them."

"Our men are listening in on every conversation that passes between their ship and Mars. We've learned a lot."

"I'm beginning to think you're more advanced than you're letting on."

"In many matters, Mr. Barnes you're still an outsider. Security, you must understand. Especially now. You've done the earth a great service but I'm still under orders. There are many things I can't let you in on. If you were a soldier, you'd readily understand. So a certain wall, not too high, though, must always remain between us."

"I'm not a soldier, true, but I do understand."

"You may be interested to know that the ship will be landing within the week."

"Really? I guess I'd better stay out of the way."

"Oh, you'll be on hand. In case something goes wrong and a new line must be written into the script fast. There must be no blunders. If there are then we must cover up. So you'll be close by, ready to write, ready to coach."

"I wonder what they'll look like."

"You'll be finding out soon enough."

In order to avert panic, the world was alerted to the coming of the Martians four days before the strange arrival.

They came.

Tall and thin with translucent skin and eyes that were almost invisible, they were that small.

There were four. Two men and two women. The women's hair was as short as the men's. Their breasts made slight bulges under their tunics.

It seemed they had listened in to radio broadcasts and spoke English, French, Italian, Polish and Spanish very well. They knew the Americas was the strongest of the world governments and so had landed there. The year, 1968, became a memorable year. The year when contact was made with another planet.

JULES Barnes stayed on the sidelines. During the three weeks the Martians remained there was no need for him. But he stayed by, ready to act in any way he was needed.

The Martians went from government to government, inspecting industry, meeting scientists and military men. Everything was as friendly as could be. When the Martians retired to their rooms, they had hurried conversations. We were behind the times, our scientists were incredibly stupid, our military men were old ladies and our industry was only fit to make children's toys.

Hidden microphones revealed all this.

"Everything has gone according to plan," Captain Shratt told Barnes the day the Martians blasted off for their home planet. "We've nothing to worry about." "I'm glad. I've been on edge the whole time they were here."

"I've got reports to make out so I'll have to leave now. But we'll get together again sometime."

"Certainly." Barnes shook hands and Shratt left the playwright's apartment.

"Hello, General," Captain Shratt said, entering his office. He took off his cap, tossed it on a leather chair, and went behind his desk.

"I've come from the president," the general said. "He says the time has come."

"Good." Shratt sat down. "I wish I was coming along."

"You're needed here. What

about this fellow Barnes? He knows an awful lot."

"We've nothing to worry from him. Besides, once we've started there's nothing anyone can do."

"Our fleet of Space ships is ready to take off within hours."

"It's best to wait till the Martian ship is well on its way. Then we can start operations. When we get to Mars they'll be unprepared. Earth will be supreme." Captain Shratt lit a cigarette.

"Only Mars could have stopped us if they'd decided to attack us. Now that threat is gone. They won't know what hit them. Thanks to a playwright and his sense of devotion to earth." ●

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